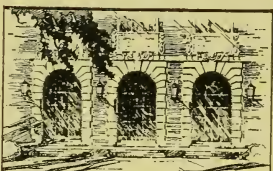




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W. E. NORRIS



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II.

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BY

W. E. NORRIS

AUTHOR OF 'MATRIMONY' 'MADEMOISELLE DE MERSAC' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

LONDON

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NO NEW THING.



CHAPTER XIII.

MR. BRUNE GETS HIS HARVEST IN.

Mrs. WINNINGTON had not lived for a matter of sixty-odd years in the world without having acquired a measure of philosophy. Experience had not, perhaps, taught her wisdom, but it had given her some knowledge of the nature of men and things, and it had dowered her with a certain dogged patience, which enabled her to put a good face upon temporary checks. When, therefore, Tom Stanniforth left Longbourne without making any declaration of his sentiments with regard to Edith, she did not for a moment give way to despair. Love at first sight was, as she was aware, an exceptional phenomenon and one which could not be counted upon as likely to occur in any individual case ; nor indeed had Mrs. Winnington, in her most sanguine moods, expected to bring matters to

a crisis within the space of a few weeks. So speedy a success would have been a rare stroke of fortune, just as it would be a piece of singularly bad luck if Mr. Stanniforth, who had remained a bachelor for more than half his life, were to yield to other fascinations before he saw Edith again. Mrs. Winnington accepted the chances of the game with all the outward equanimity of a practised player, and smiled sweetly upon her prey as she bade him good-bye, cordially re-echoing his wish that they might meet in London next spring, if not sooner. She hoped it might be sooner, she said, and added within herself an asseveration that it most certainly should be ; but that this joyful reunion was to be brought about no later than in the following month, through the instrumentality of Mr. Brune, was more than she bargained for, Mr. Stanniforth not having thought it necessary to mention the circumstance.

It is often instanced as a proof of the good will of Providence towards mankind that horses, elephants, and other domestic animals should be ignorant of their own strength : perhaps we ought to be no less thankful that ladies of Mrs. Winnington's stamp seldom succeed in gauging the measure of man's timorousness. It would be difficult to say why Tom Stanniforth should have been afraid of a fat, smiling woman who

had no hold over him and could do him no possible injury ; but the fact remains that he was so, and that, knowing what her wishes were, and having very nearly made up his mind not to gratify them, he drew a long breath of relief as soon as he had escaped from her presence.

Far, however, as that mature strategist was from being dismayed, she was a little disappointed and somewhat out of temper ; and when Mrs. Winnington was out of temper those about her fared sadly. For several days she made the lives of the inhabitants of Longbourne a burden to them ; after which she discovered that the state of her health absolutely required three weeks of Homburg, where, as she had seen by the papers, the fashionable world which her soul loved was at that time largely represented.

‘It is a ruinously expensive journey,’ she remarked to Margaret. ‘Of course we shall travel like the paupers that we are, going straight through, and engaging a couple of rooms on the second floor of some horrible little public-house when we arrive. I am sorry for poor dear Edith’s sake that everything will be so uncomfortable ; still I feel that it is a positive duty to go.’

Mrs. Stanniforth did not accompany the travellers to Germany. Her share in the expedition was confined to the defrayal of its cost

and to telegraphing to secure suitable lodging for her mother and sister at their journey's end. As the waters promptly brought the gout out of the former lady's system, and had the effect of keeping her (as she wrote) 'upon the flat of her back in screaming agonies' for ten days, it may be presumed that Miss Winnington had a bad time of it. Happily, however, the workings of human affairs are such that what is one person's loss is very commonly another's gain; and if Edith had to pass through a period of vicarious martyrdom, those whom she had left behind her at Longbourne enjoyed, by way of compensation a brief taste of the blessings of peace.

Philip, who was much in Nellie's society at this time, declared to her that he had never been so happy before in his life. 'All things considered,' said he, 'I am inclined to think that nothing suits me like domesticity. Meg and I lead a sort of Darby and Joan life, and we enjoy it prodigiously. We don't talk much; for there is an unspoken agreement between us to avoid all mention of absent friends and other unpleasant topics; we sit beaming at one another and hugging ourselves in a sybaritish contentment. She is very busy, as she always is, in a quiet, leisurely sort of way, with her correspondence and her charities and what not; and I twirl my thumbs and watch her, which is

delightful. Did you ever notice what a soothing kind of person Meg is to watch? She is never in a hurry; she doesn't upset things, or catch her drapery upon corners of the furniture, and her dress doesn't accompany all her movements with a maddening swish-swish, like the dresses of some ladies whom we know. I should doubt whether there is another woman in the world so pleasant to live with as Meg. She never rubs you the wrong way; she never asks you whether you would like this or that; she knows by intuition what you want, and there it is always at your elbow.'

'She spoils you,' said Nellie.

'Just so; and if there is a thing I love it is being spoilt. I should like to go on existing in this way to the end of my days.'

'It wouldn't be good for you,' said Nellie, shaking her head wisely.

'Don't you think so? Perhaps you are right. Nice things never are good for one, and no doubt a little bracing is expedient from time to time. Well, we shall all be braced soon, when Mrs. Winnington comes back with renewed vigour to tell us about all the dukes and duchesses whom she has encountered at Homburg, and to ask me whether I have yet decided upon some means of making an honest livelihood. There is no complaint so tantalising as

the gout. It is for ever threatening terrible things, but somehow or other it won't proceed to extremities—or rather it won't proceed beyond them. And yet there are so many vital points open to attack. Possibly Mrs. Winnington may not possess a heart, but I know she has a stomach, and, considering the reckless manner in which she often treats it, it certainly ought not to be an invulnerable one. Still, it is borne in upon me that she will die in a green old age, after having worried all the rest of us into our graves. Meanwhile, let us make the most of an interval of calm.'

'If you are so fond of a quiet life, why are you perpetually running away from it?' asked Miss Brune pertinently.

'Business,' answered Philip. 'I have business sometimes, though you might not think it, to look at me. I shouldn't go to London at this time of year if I could help it.'

The answer was a moderately truthful one. It was indeed a sense of duty rather than inclination that led Mr. Marescalchi to pay occasional flying visits to Coomassie Villa at this season; and although, when once he was there, the mystery and fun of the thing pleased him well enough, he was never sorry to return to the superior luxuries and refinements of Longbourne. True to her established rule of conduct, Margaret asked

no questions, thereby escaping the proverbial fate of those who thus court deception. When Philip remarked casually that he was going up to town from Saturday to Monday to do some shopping and get his hair cut, she did not remind him that Saturday afternoon is not a favourable time for making purchases in London, or point out that it was physically impossible that his hair could be any shorter than it was already. She said nothing ; but went about her avocations with a smiling face and an uneasy heart, telling herself that in this she was but submitting to the destiny of all fond and wise mothers, and taking comfort from the lesson which experience had taught her, that as soon as her boy got into trouble of any serious nature, he would be tolerably certain to come to her in order to be helped out of it.

Thus the summer slipped quietly and imperceptibly away. The mornings and evenings became chilly ; the fields grew ripe for the sickle, and patches of red and yellow began to show themselves upon the green of the woods. Then came harvest time and the slaughter of the partridges. It was not until the middle of September that Mrs. Winnington, who had proceeded from Homburg to Switzerland (by the doctor's orders, she averred), reappeared, bringing her sheaves with her. She was one of those persons

who think it their duty, whenever they visit the Continent, to encumber themselves with a store of cheap presents for those whom they have left behind them. It was not Mrs. Winnington's habit to give money to the servants at Longbourne ; there were too many of them, she said ; and, besides, they ought not to be led to expect tips from one of the family ; still, she should like them to think that they had all been remembered. Consequently, on the evening of her return from abroad, she would sail majestically into the housekeeper's room, bearing an ancient leather bag, from whence issued a bountiful supply of thimbles, Palais-Royal jewellery, and the like, while at the bottom of this cornucopia there commonly lurked some specially hideous gift, destined for the mistress of the house.

'It is so difficult to choose anything that dear Margaret will like,' Mrs. Winnington would often say ; 'but I think one is always safe with some little ornament for the drawing-room table.'

This time, however, the drawing-room was spared, and it was the hall that was decorated with a loud-voiced cuckoo clock, which had been picked up a bargain at Interlaken. The slumbers of the entire household were disturbed by the periodical hootings of this delightful acquisition up to two o'clock at night, when it triumphantly

gave forth its note thirty-six consecutive times; after which it suddenly ceased from troubling, and the weary had rest. Nothing would induce it to resume its labours on the following morning, and suspicions of foul play rested upon various persons; but, fortunately, Mrs. Winnington had come home in the best of humours, and was not disposed to quarrel with anybody.

At breakfast she gave, as Philip had predicted she would, a detailed description of all the exalted personages whom she had fallen in with at Homburg, and of how delighted they had been to see her again, and how they had been wondering, all through the London season, what could have become of her, and how Lady This and Lady That had inquired very kindly after dear Margaret, and had said what a pity it was that she should shut herself up so. And what made these reminiscences so cheering was that the great people had not confined themselves to empty civilities.

‘Dear Margaret, I don’t know what you will think of me. It seems very unkind to leave you again so soon, after having been away all this time; but I am afraid we cannot manage more than three weeks here at present. People laugh at me when I say that my time is not my own; and they won’t believe that I would far rather remain quietly here than rush about visiting

from house to house. Of course there is this to be said, that, for dear Edith's sake, I ought not to drop old friends; and with so many, you know, it is a case of out of sight out of mind. Very cordial and kind if they happen to meet one; but if they don't——' Mrs. Winnington finished her sentence with an expressive shrug of her ample shoulders. 'In any case, you may count upon us for Christmas,' she added reassuringly.

All this was very nice; but there was a cloud upon Margaret's brow, a certain guilty unwillingness to meet her mother's eye, which that observant lady could not help detecting in the long run. As soon as breakfast was over, she took her daughter aside, and interrogated her affectionately.

'Now, my dear child, I do trust you are not feeling hurt at my running away from you. It really is a matter of duty. If it were not for dear Edith, I should ask for nothing better than to be always with you. I am sure you must be aware of that.'

Margaret, without intentional irony, assured her mother that she had never entertained the smallest doubt upon that point, and added that she was only too glad that Edith should have every opportunity of seeing the world and people. 'Especially men. It would be a great misfortune

if she were to decide her fate, or if it were to be decided for her, too hastily.'

'Oh, my dear, I have decided nothing. Mr. Stanniforth would be suitable in a great many ways, but of course I don't mean to say that she might not do better. Indeed, I almost think that she *ought* to do better, if only one were not so cut off from all society! But if it is not that, what is it that is troubling you, Margaret? I know you have something upon your mind.'

'Indeed I have not.'

'Oh, but, my dear, I can see,' persisted Mrs. Winnington. 'I'm sure that there is something.'

'No; at least, nothing of any importance. I was rather astonished this morning to hear that Tom Stanniforth had arrived at Broom Leas last night, that is all.'

'*What!*' cried Mrs. Winnington, who, however prepared she might have been to throw Mr. Stanniforth over if it should seem expedient to do so, had no idea of being thrown over by him; 'do you mean to say that he is actually staying in the house, and never told you he was coming? Oh, I simply can't believe it!'

'I met Nellie at church this morning, and she told me,' Margaret said. 'I was a little annoyed about it, because I cannot understand why Tom should not have come to this house if

he wanted to be in these parts at all; and also because—well, because, for many reasons, I think it is a pity that he should have come at this particular time. But Nellie says his appearance was quite unexpected. Her father gave him a sort of general invitation when he was here before, and yesterday they got a telegram from him in the morning, saying that he would arrive in time for dinner, unless he heard from them to the contrary.'

'Upon my word!' exclaimed Mrs. Winnington. And, after a short pause—'Now I don't want to triumph over you, dear Margaret; I detest people who are for ever saying "I told you so," and I never do it myself. Still, I can't help just reminding you—what did I always tell you about that man?'

'I don't remember. Nothing that was not in his favour, I am sure. I thought you had such a very high opinion of Tom.'

'No, no; I don't mean him; I mean that Brune man. I am very seldom deceived in a face, and there is a look of slyness about his which has repelled me from the first. I warned you that he was not to be trusted, and now you see! As for the girl, she has been setting her cap at Mr. Stanniforth all along. I saw it plainly enough, but it really did not seem worth while to take any notice of it, particularly as I

suspected that it was almost as much a desire to spite me as to catch him that was at the bottom of her behaviour. And now their telegraphing off for him on the very day of my return puts it beyond a doubt. Oh, yes, my dear Margaret, I know what you would say. You are so innocent yourself that you fancy everybody else must be like you ; but you don't know the world, my dear, and you never will. Well, I confess I am astonished. Ingratitude one expects; but a deliberate, coarse insult!—for this is nothing less—to me there is something more shocking, more repulsive in vulgar-mindedness, than in any mere external vulgarity.'

Margaret did not smile, even inwardly. If her mother was vulgar-minded, she was unaware of the fact, or at all events was able to shut her eyes to it. She felt it incumbent upon her, however, to exonerate the Bruness from the charge brought against them, explaining that Nellie positively disliked Tom Stanniforth, and had gone rather out of her way to show that she did so.

'Oh, my dear child, what a stale old trick! I should not have thought that that pretence of a little aversion could have taken in even you. I don't for a moment suppose that the girl has a chance of success, but it is sickening to think that anyone can behave in that way. Poor

Mr. Stanniforth! don't you think it would be as well to ask him to come on here when he gets away from those people?'

'I would rather not,' answered Margaret slowly. 'And, besides, I doubt whether he could come. Nellie said he was only able to run down for a day or two, and that his object was to see their harvest home. I suppose they don't have harvest homes in the neighbourhood of Manchester.'

'Harvest home!' The depth of Mrs. Winnington's scorn was not to be expressed in words. 'Of course,' said she, 'we shall be expected to attend this rustic festivity.'

'I was thinking that perhaps we might make some excuse.'

'Not for the world! They would think we were offended, which is the very last thing one would wish them to imagine. No! you may do as you like; but I shall be there.'

And in the ring of Mrs. Winnington's voice, as she announced this decision, there seemed ample promise that she would not be there for nothing.

Nevertheless, when the time came, she showed herself under no aggressive aspect, and advanced to the attack with a great deal of affectionate sprightliness. She herself would have said that she was too well-bred to behave otherwise: but

the truth was that she felt no serious alarm, and thoroughly despised her enemy. She was a woman of very limited perceptions and could never really believe that there were people in the world whose tastes and opinions differed from her own. When she encountered any such, she usually set them down as mad or dishonest. Now, Mr. Stanniforth being neither the one nor the other, it was impossible that he should entangle himself with Nellie Brune—a person in whom Mrs. Winnington could see but little to admire—when so beautiful and charming a girl as Edith might be his for the asking. Consequently there was no cause for agitation. The Brunes, to be sure, had been guilty of gross insolence, and should be duly chastised for it at a fitting opportunity ; but this was only a matter of detail.

The Longbourne party walked over to Broom Leas late in the afternoon, and found Mr. Stanniforth clad in white flannels and playing a vigorous game of lawn-tennis with Walter and two younger members of the Brune family, while Nellie and her father looked on. After the usual greetings had been exchanged, and the chances of the rain holding off till night exhaustively discussed, Mrs. Winnington bore down upon the culprit with ponderous playfulness.

‘ We are very much offended with you ; we have a great mind not to speak to you at all. Of course we know that you must have been dreadfully bored when you were in this stagnant neighbourhood before ; but we did think that if anything made you wish to return to it, you would have given our house the preference, dull as it is.’

‘ But I wasn’t asked,’ answered Tom, with a side glance at Margaret, whose eyes were resolutely fixed upon a noisy flight of rooks overhead.

‘ Oh, Mr. Stanniforth, I am afraid that will never do ! you must really find some more plausible excuse than that. Margaret, dear, I am telling this very uncivil brother-in-law of yours that we shall certainly not forgive him unless he promises to come to us next week, and stay until he is told to go away. She won’t listen to me. Do you know, Mr. Stanniforth, I really believe she is a little offended. Of course I was only in fun ; but, joking apart, I think dear Margaret is the least bit in the world hurt. She is very sensitive, and you know there are not many people whom she is strongly attached to. Do you think it was quite kind to come down and stay with comparative strangers, and not even to let her know that you would be here ?’

Mrs. Winnington had stationed herself in the middle of the tennis-court, and had broken

up the game; a circumstance which had perhaps escaped her notice, but which would not in any case have struck her as being worthy of attention. The two boys had strolled away towards the farmyard, grumbling under their breath. Walter was talking eagerly to Edith, whose colour was coming and going, and whose countenance wore that half-frightened, half-pleased expression which Hugh Kenyon had seen and understood long before. Philip had joined Mr. Brune and Nellie, and was making them laugh—doubtless at the expense of someone near at hand.

Margaret, standing alone, and marking the distribution of the groups, sighed softly, and then was seized with a sudden spasm of silent laughter. There was going to be trouble, she thought; trouble which, when it came, would be of a somewhat serious kind, and would create a lasting breach between some of those who were now conversing together so amicably. This was sad; still it was impossible not to perceive the humorous aspect of the situation. Who could see, without a smile, four blind men hurrying from the four points of the compass towards the same spot? One might sincerely grieve for them after the crash had come, when they had knocked their four poor skulls together, and were reeling backwards with groans and mutual recriminations; but the approach, at

least, of the catastrophe must inevitably be comical. Margaret, whose eyes were now open, could afford to laugh at the blind ; though, to be sure, it was not so very long since she herself had been one of them. She had intended to give her mother a hint of the possible state of affairs as regarded Walter and Edith ; she had intended also, at one time, to speak a few friendly words to Walter himself on the same subject, but her courage had failed her in both instances ; and, for that matter, it is doubtful whether she would have done any good by hastening the crisis which nothing could have warded off. Now that her own vision was so clear, she saw, or thought she saw, rather more than Edith's blushes and Walter's absurdly happy young face. For one thing, she saw that Tom Stanniforth was lending a very small part of his attention to the blandishments of his companion, and that his eyes were never once removed from the spot where Nellie stood laughing at Philip's inaudible facetiousness. Was there a clue here, then, to her brother-in-law's sudden and inexplicable interest in harvest homes ? Upon the face of it, it seemed in no wise improbable ; and it was when observation had carried her thus far that Margaret was overtaken by the disposition towards laughter above mentioned.

‘You look amused,’ said Mr. Brune, had approached her unnoticed. ‘If you are thinking of anything likely to raise the spirits of a discouraged farmer, it would be kind to mention it. Three bad harvests in succession, and no hops to speak of ! If this sort of thing goes on, you will grace no more harvest homes at Broom Leas with your presence ; or at least, if you do, you will have another man for your entertainer.’

‘Oh, don’t say that !’ said Margaret ; for, circumstances being as they were, the prediction struck her as somewhat ominous. ‘Whatever may happen, I hope *I*, at all events, may be with you next harvest time, and for many harvest times to come.’

Mr. Brune naturally did not follow the drift of her thoughts. ‘Oh, well,’ he said, ‘I dare say I shall manage to keep out of the workhouse for another year or two ; but you must allow me the farmer’s prescriptive right to grumble, especially on a day of merry-making. By-the-bye, I trust you are prepared to go without dinner to-night, and to sit down to an indigestible supper towards nine o’clock. Poor as one’s yield is, it takes a long time to get it in, and I don’t suppose the last waggon will enter the gates till after sunset. Then, you know, we shall be in duty bound to look in upon the men at their

supper, and to have our healths drunk and make speeches.'

'I don't think we must wait for that,' said Margaret. 'My mother ought not to stand about in the cold, and it is getting dusk already, and the dew is beginning to fall. Besides, I did not say anything to the servants about not being back for dinner.'

The truth was that she was anxious to get away as soon as might be. 'If we only can avoid sudden discoveries,' she thought.

'Your mother,' said Mr. Brune, 'will find a blazing fire in the drawing-room. Suppose we take her in there. The young people will let us know when it is time to come out and join in the shouting.'

It was thus that Mrs. Winnington was spared the pain of seeing her daughter and Walter walk slowly down the avenue, side by side, and disappear behind the belt of larches which separated the Broom Leas paddocks from the road. This couple was shortly afterwards followed by another.

'Walter has gone to see them load the last waggon, and Mr. Stanniforth wants to go too,' said Nellie. 'Are you coming, Philip?'

But Philip, mindful of the old adage as to the relation of odd numbers to company, shook his

head, saying that he thought he would go round to the stables and smoke a pipe. He was not exactly jealous of Tom Stanniforth, but he thought that good-natured person a very great bore. Nobody enjoys retiring into the back-ground to make room for others ; and Philip perhaps disliked the sensation more than most people. Habit, and encouragement from various quarters, had led him to behave as though, and almost to believe that, he had a special right to Nellie's society. Sooner or later, of course, a day must come when he would have to publicly abrogate that pretension ; but in the meantime it was pleasant to play the dog in the manger's part, and disagreeable to be ousted from it. So he strayed rather disconsolately about the stables and strawyard in the grey, chilly twilight, yawning, and saying to himself that he would not be able to stand this sort of thing long, and that he must positively go up to London, set to work with old Steinberger, and begin making some definite plans for the future. These thoughts, together with the saddening influence of the autumn evening, soon brought on one of his periodical fits of depression. He saw that things were going badly with him, and would probably go worse ; the luck to which he commonly trusted seemed but a broken reed to lean upon ; and finally he fell to wondering whether, if the

worst came to the worst, he would ever have the pluck to cut his throat.

He had already fallen to so dismal a depth in the process of self-communion that he was trying, quite ineffectually, to persuade himself that, since suicide was in itself a cowardly action, there could not properly be said to be any cowardice in the fear of committing it, when the slow trampling of heavy hoofs, the creaking of wheels. and the shouting of many voices, told him that the term of his solitude was at hand. These cheerful sounds came nearer and nearer, and at length there appeared against the pale sky a huge, dark, moving mass, crowned by sundry indistinct human forms. As the team was brought to a standstill a few yards from the spot where Philip stood, other dim figures became visible moving about the gravel drive; Mr. Brune and the two ladies emerged from the house, and the boys at the top of the load struck up a discordant chorus, in which those on *terra firma* joined with a will—

Mr. Brune he's a very good man,
He treats his 'osses as well as he can;
We've once turned over and twice stuck fast,
But we've got his harvest home at last.

This qualified song of triumph, bellowed out in a dialect which it would be difficult to reproduce by means of any wild arrangement of vowels and

consonants, was followed by others equally to the point, each verse being received by a somewhat disproportionate amount of hooraying.

Then the waggoner stepped forward, whip in hand, and with much dignity delivered an oration, which, like the speeches of some other persons in a less humble rank of life, started well, but grew unmanageable as it progressed, and would probably never have come to an end at all if, after the first five minutes, someone had not hit upon the expedient of trying a little more hooraying. Mr. Brune made a brief response; and with that the proceedings, so far as Philip and the ladies from Longbourne were concerned, terminated.

Mrs. Winnington was quite clear and decisive about returning home in time for dinner. She had accomplished the object of her visit; the ways and habits of rustics did not interest her at all, and to sit down to cold supper was what she could not contemplate without shuddering. She therefore expressed herself much gratified with the ceremony which she had witnessed, and prepared for departure.

‘Now what has become of these young people?’ she asked, peering out into the darkness. ‘Edith dear, are you there?’

‘I am here, mamma,’ answered Edith, appearing at her mother’s elbow, escorted by a tall and manly form.

‘ Oh! Well, I am afraid we must be going, much as I should have liked to remain a little longer. Dear Margaret is feeling rather tired. Good night, Mr. Stanniforth. I suppose we may shake hands again now that we have made up our quarrel,’ she added, extending her hand to Walter, who grasped it cordially, and remarked—

‘ Always glad to shake hands with you, Mrs. Winnington, though I’m not Stanniforth.’

‘ Oh! it’s you, is it?’ said Mrs. Winnington, with a perceptible change of tone; ‘ I didn’t see. Where is Mr. Stanniforth, then?’

‘ Upon my word, I can’t tell you. He and Nellie were walking together—where was it? Now I come to think of it, I don’t believe I have seen them since we left the field. Perhaps they are there yet.’

‘ What? Then it is high time that somebody went to look for them, I should think,’ said Mrs. Winnington severely.

Despite his own ill-humour, this opening was more than Philip could withstand. ‘ Don’t spoil sport,’ he whispered ; ‘ do you mean to say you haven’t noticed that the millionaire is desperately smitten?’

‘ Smitten? What do you mean?’ returned the agitated lady, rising most satisfactorily. ‘ I have noticed nothing of the sort—there is nothing of the sort. You are always imagining some-

thing abomin—improbable. Edith, my dear you are coughing. And I told you so particularly not to walk on the damp grass in your thin boots.'

'But indeed it is not at all damp,' pleaded Edith tremulously.

'Now, my dear child, what *is* the use of your saying that? You are positively drenched. If you have caught cold I shall be more than annoyed.'

'I told her she oughtn't to stand about,' put in Walter.

'Then why did you keep her out of doors?' retorted Mrs. Winnington very snappishly. 'Come, Edith, you must walk home briskly.'

Edith meekly obeyed; and Walter, as he stood at the door, listening to their retreating footsteps, heard the careful mother's voice raised to scolding pitch the whole way down the avenue.

Stanniforth and Nellie heard her too. They were not so very far off, after all, having only strolled down to the end of the paddock to see the moon rise. The sky, it was true, was overcast, and the almanack would have informed them that there would be no moon until after midnight; but perhaps they had omitted to consult the almanack. It would be hard to say exactly why neither of them spoke or moved

when the departing visitors passed within a few yards of them. First came Mrs. Stanniforth and Marescalchi, walking quickly and in silence; Mrs. Winnington, breathless but eloquent, followed at a slower pace.

‘Be so good as not to contradict me, Edith. You never pay the smallest attention to what I tell you; but at least you might listen when I am speaking. How can you possibly tell whether you have caught cold or not? I say that you have; and you know what an object you are when you have a cold in your head; besides which, there is always the risk of inflammation of the lungs, and you are all of you consumptive really. However, that is not what I mind. Now don’t interrupt, please; you know very well what I mean;—that is not the *only* thing that I mind. When you were younger, your running wild with these young Brunes did not so much matter; but you ought to have the sense to see that it is both silly and unladylike to keep up that sort of thing now. Mind it does not happen again. Now don’t interrupt, Edith, because’—&c. &c.

When distance had softened down this homily into a mere angry buzzing, the listeners had a little laugh.

‘Poor things!’ sighed Mr. Stanniforth compassionately.

‘Poor things! whom do you mean?’ asked Nellie. ‘Poor Edith, if you like.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry for them both. The girl has the worst of it now, I grant you; but the tables are sure to be turned sooner or later, and I can imagine that it must be very aggravating to be listened to in absolute silence, when you want to be contradicted and have a good row and have done with it. Mrs. Winnington isn’t a bad old woman, you know, as old women go.’

‘I should be sorry to think that there were many like her,’ said Nellie.

‘Oh, I don’t know; I have met worse. I was talking to her for some time this afternoon, and really I was rather pleased with some things that she said. She showed a good deal more feeling than I should have expected.’

‘Feeling? What about?’

‘Well—about vivisection, if you must know,’ answered Tom with a conscious laugh; ‘but she wasn’t humbugging me; at least I don’t think she was. I will say that for Mrs. Winnington, that she isn’t a humbug. Worldly, of course, but honestly worldly, which is something.’

‘I wish I were as charitable as you are,’ said Nellie rather wistfully; ‘it must be a very pleasant sort of sensation to like everybody.’

The only drawback is that you can hardly be able to care for any individual very much.'

'I assure you you are mistaken,' cried Tom eagerly.

'Am I?'

Nellie had it upon the tip of her tongue to ask him whether he liked Edith very much, for she was rather curious to hear what his answer would be. But, upon the whole, she thought better of this and held her peace.

'Shall we go back to the house now?' she asked presently. And, without waiting for a reply, she walked swiftly back across the grass, he following her in a meditative mood.

CHAPTER XIV.

PHILIP IN A NEW PART.

IF Mrs. Winnington and her youngest daughter had a disagreeable walk home, owing to the absolute lack of any sympathy between them, the couple who preceded them across the wet grass and through the chilly mists of the autumn evening were in no such evil case, and found mutual solace for the troubles of life in one another's companionship. Philip was still in a downcast and chastened frame of mind, and at such times he commonly felt as though Margaret were the only true friend he had in the world; while she, perceiving his low spirits, and naturally connecting them with Tom Stanniforth's rather conspicuous attentions to Nellie, was half sorry that he should be in trouble, half glad that it should be the means of moving him towards a more than usually demonstrative affection for herself. The best love of the best women has always something of a maternal character, and everybody knows that a son can pay no greater

compliment to his mother than to make her the recipient of his confidence, whether spoken or unspoken. Margaret did not attempt any specific kind of consolation, being too much in dread of appearing intrusive for that ; but she let her boy know, in a general way, that all his emotions, pleasurable and otherwise, were shared by her, and she further soothed him with such delicate forms of flattery as are conveyed for the most part by inference.

This process was so far successful that it had the effect of warming up Philip's self-esteem, which had fallen below freezing-point ; and it was but natural that gratitude to so perceptive a benefactress should make him wish to do or say something that should be agreeable to her. So presently he came out with—

‘Meg, I think I was in rather too great a hurry to decide on cutting the Bar. I don't in the least believe, you know, that I shall ever do any good as a lawyer; still, as I have put my hand to the plough, I might as well perhaps go on to the end of the first furrow, and if my being called was of no other use, at least it would please you, wouldn't it?’

‘Of course it would please me,’ cried Margaret ; ‘I can't tell you how much it would please me. You know I wouldn't for the world urge you to take up any profession that you

disliked ; but the fact of being called to the Bar would not commit you to anything, and it might perhaps lead to some appointment that might suit you. And then—you don't mind people saying disagreeable things about you, I dare say.'

'Not in the least, so long as I don't hear them.'

'But I am-weak-minded enough to be made unhappy by them. And you see, I do hear them; I can't help it. You don't know what a satisfaction it will be to me to be able to tell one or two solicitous friends that you have no intention of leading an idle life.'

'Poor old Meg!' said Philip with generous compassion for this womanly weakness. 'All right, then ; that's settled. In two years' time you shall have a photograph of me in my wig and gown with which to confound the sceptical, and in the meantime I shall keep my eyes open, and try to discover some less objectionable way of earning my bread and butter.'

Margaret thanked him so warmly that he really felt for the moment that he was performing an act of self-sacrifice, and could not find it in his heart to inform her of his actual projects, as he had been very nearly doing five minutes before. Why vex her needlessly? he thought. It was not to be expected that she would relish the idea of seeing him behind the footlights of

the opera ; and it was so pleasant to be patted on the back and told what a good, kind fellow he was. He began to think that he *was* rather good and kind—quite as much so, at all events, as circumstances would allow him to be ; and, by way of showing how thoroughly in earnest he was, he declared that he would go up to London and ‘set to work’ no later than the very next morning.

Margaret was a little taken aback by this precipitancy ; the more so as she recollected that the Michaelmas Term did not begin until the month of November. But that circumstance need not stand in the way of private study, she reflected, and perhaps it was best to strike while the iron was hot. One thing, however, she felt impelled to say :—

‘I hope, dear, you are not hurrying away for any particular reason.’

‘Particular reason?’ repeated Philip ; and it was well that the darkness hid his alarmed face.

‘I mean, you mustn’t jump to conclusions. Tom Stanniforth is the Brunes’ guest, you see, and they must be civil to him. I suspect that, if the truth were known, you would find that Nellie is very anxious for his visit to come to an end.’

Philip burst into a great laugh of relief. ‘So you thought I was going off in a fit of jealousy !

Now, Meg, I do think you might have known me better. Am I ever jealous? Do I ever covet my neighbour's house, or his wife, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is his? There is only one person in the world about whom I have ever felt jealous, and that is yourself. There used to be a time when I was horribly afraid that you would end by marrying the trusty Kenyon.'

'Then,' said Margaret, who now, in her turn, had reason to be grateful to the darkness—'we are quits; for you might have known me better than to think that of me.'

Philip left Longbourne, the following morning, in a condition of comfortable self-approval, and no presentiment of the circumstances under which he was next to see the old place occurred to cast a gloom over his excellent spirits.

'Where shall I write to you?' Margaret asked, as he climbed into the dog-cart that was to take him to the station.

'Oh! the Club, as usual,' he answered.

He had never been in the habit of giving any other address than this, and, since he had become the tenant of Coomassie Villa, had often blessed the lucky chance which had preserved him from a less cautious custom. Margaret knew that he sometimes went to an hotel, sometimes to rooms, and had not cared to ask for more precise information upon the subject.

Now although there was no particular reason of the kind that Mrs. Stanniforth had imagined to hasten Philip's departure, there was an approaching event which rendered his presence in London at this juncture, if not essential, at least desirable and becoming. On his arrival at Coomassie Villa he found Mrs. Webber (the Aunt Keziah to whom it may be remembered Mrs. Marescalchi had once made reference as the sole representative of her kith and kin) in temporary possession of the house, and exactly twenty-four hours later a very diminutive gentleman was added to the list of Fanny's near relations.

It seems possible that readers may not, up to the present point, have become greatly enamoured of Philip Marescalchi, and perhaps—with a view towards raising him in the estimation of an important section of them—it may be well here to state that he proved himself a father of the most unexceptionable description. To the ordinary male mind an infant, both as regards its aspect and its habits, is a somewhat repulsive little creature. It has none of the soft prettinesses which belong to the young of the lower animals ; it is both exacting and ungrateful ; and the utter helplessness which is supposed to endear it in a special degree to one of its parents seldom arouses a corresponding sentiment in the breast of the other. Philip, however, was an exception

to the general rule. From the first he manifested an immense interest in and affection for his baby, which was indeed an unobjectionable specimen of its kind, being neither red nor uproarious, but a tiny, waxen-faced thing which passed the best part of its days and nights in profound slumber. He purchased for it a cradle so lovely that Mrs. Webber threw up her hands in mingled admiration and dismay at the sight of it ; and beside this expensive toy he would sit contentedly hour after hour, endeavouring by means of various expedients to attract the attention of its inmate, who would occasionally reward his efforts with a tipsy sort of smile.

Most ladies will be disposed to think that there must have been some good in a man who could so conduct himself ; and it is possible that they may be right. Philip himself was a good deal puzzled and diverted by his own state of mind, and would often laugh gently at himself with that good-humoured indulgence which was his normal attitude in moments of introspection. He had no idea of shaping any particular course in life for himself, or of steering by the light of any fixed principle or set of principles ; he liked to let things happen to him, and to watch the results ; and when these took unexpected forms, as they often did, he was interested, and sometimes greatly tickled. This experience of family

life and paternity had for him the charm of novelty mingled with a certain spice of unreality. He never forgot that he could escape from it all whenever it might please him to do so, and return to practical bachelorhood and the society of his equals, and in that knowledge lay, perhaps, the explanation of the fact that he was quite satisfied to remain where he was. And he was really fond of poor little Fanny, who was recovering very slowly, and upon whom feebleness and her newly-acquired matronly dignity had exercised a softening and refining influence. After a time, when she was able to leave the house, Philip used to hire an open fly, and take her out for drives, through miry lanes and byways, into the country, where they were as secure from recognition as in the heart of Central Africa, and where creeping mists, and falling leaves, and the pale light of watery sunsets affected her simple happiness with no chilly warning of change. Long afterwards Philip sometimes looked back upon those days with an aching feeling at his heart and a sigh over 'circumstances,' which he has always blamed, and always will blame, for the various misfortunes that have fallen to his lot.

Fanny's love and admiration for her husband knew no bounds. She was firmly convinced, and would frequently declare, that there was no

one like him in the world—no one so kind, so unselfish, so uncomplaining. ‘And to think of him living like this, after what he’s been accustomed to!’ Fanny would exclaim, with tears in her eyes. In truth, Coomassie Villa, owing to the disorganised state of the household, was by no means a comfortable place of residence at this time; and if there had not been a good deal of amiability in Philip’s composition, he would hardly have been able to tolerate Mrs. Webber, who had taken upon herself the functions of nurse, and who occasionally showed herself to be a very unpleasant old person indeed.

Mrs. Webber, unfortunately, was not an Oxfordshire rustic, who might have been overawed by Mr. Marescalchi’s gentility, but a shrewd woman, London born and London bred, whose husband kept a public-house in Islington, and whose views of life and humanity were of the coarser and more practical kind. She had never approved of Fanny’s escapade, and did not disguise her opinion that her niece’s husband was ‘a slippery one.’

‘When are you a-going to come forward, like a honest man, and let this poor child have his rights?’ she asked, making a sudden descent upon Philip one afternoon when he was sitting alone in the dreary little drawing-room, and tossing the baby with a series of violent upward

jerks while she spoke. She was a tall, stout woman with sharp, black eyes and grizzled corkscrew curls, and she put her question in a determined manner.

‘His rights? Well, really, Mrs. Webber, I think that at the present moment he may fairly claim it as one of his rights that he should not be made sick, as he certainly will be, if you go on hurling him into the air as you are doing much longer. You can’t mean to tell me that any human being, of however tender years, can *like* that mode of treatment.’

‘Don’t you be imperent, young man. I haven’t brought up ten children of my own, nor yet I haven’t left my comfortable home and come here to do servant’s work, for you to teach me what babies like and what they don’t like.’

‘Mrs. Webber, I feel that we have acted most selfishly in keeping you so long. Let us lose no time in engaging a nurse and restoring you to your neglected family.’

‘Hah! make use of me so long as I’m wanted, and then show me the door—that’s it, is it? But I’d have you to know, Philip, that I’m not one as can be treated that way. Are you a-going to do your dooty by my niece? Are you a-going to love, honour, and cherish her as your wife, and introduce her as such to your relations?

For that is what you've sworn to do at the altar, mind you.'

'It may be so ; but I do not recollect that clause in the marriage service. In any case, the matter is one between Fanny and me, and, highly as I respect you, Mrs. Webber, I don't intend to discuss it with you.'

'There's two must give their word to that bargain,' cried Mrs. Webber, with a defiant toss of her head and of the long-suffering baby. 'Now, listen to me, Philip ; I don't want to have no trouble ; let's sit down and talk over things quiet, as between friends.'

'Mrs. Webber, I am sorry to interrupt you, and it grieves me to say anything of a nature to hurt your feelings ; but there is a trifling matter which I think it best to mention to you before we go any further. Twice within the last five minutes you have addressed me as "Philip." Don't do it again, please ; I don't like it.'

The effect of this mild remonstrance was very remarkable. Mrs. Webber sank down upon the nearest chair, dropped the baby upon her knees, and began to cry.

'Never did I think to be so spoke to in this house ! Not to be allowed to call my own niece's husband by his name ! Well, this *is* unkind !' she ejaculated between her sobs.

Philip was immensely delighted. He found

himself the richer by a new experience, and mentally noted it down under the heading of 'How to deal with the lower classes.' Finding he was master of the situation, he proceeded, in accordance with the rules of war, to follow up his advantage and trample upon the fallen.

'My good woman, your intentions may be excellent; but you are meddling with matters which are too high for you. I may in time succeed in raising my wife to my own rank in society; but the process must be taken in hand slowly and delicately. As for her relations, I haven't married them, and it will be altogether out of the question, I am afraid, that we should receive them upon terms of intimacy.'

This was rather overshooting the mark. Mrs. Webber raised her head, and snorted wrathfully.

'Intimacy, indeed!' quoth she. 'Wait till you are asked for your intimacy. *I* don't want it, nor never did. I want my niece's rights. I'm standing up for them as won't stand up for themselves.'

But at this juncture Marescalchi junior intervened appositely with a long-repressed howl, and had to be carried upstairs.

Philip, left in possession of the field of battle, stretched out his legs, whistled, sighed, and made a dismal grimace. He was not afraid of Mrs.

Webber compromising his future in any very serious manner; but she certainly had it in her power to cause him much intermittent trouble and worry; and that was almost as bad. He could not help thinking how much better it would have been if he had married Nellie Brune, and how much—how very much better—if he had not married at all. Then he got up, shook himself, and walked away in the rain to his club, where, chancing to meet an acquaintance who was passing through town, he soon forgot all his sorrows in a game of pyramids.

In the month of October Herr Steinberger returned to London; and Philip lost no time in placing himself in the hands of that competent professor. Steinberger, this time, was complimentary, and more encouraging than he had been upon the occasion of Philip's first visit to him.

'You have a goot ear,' he was pleased to say; 'and the voice—well, the voice is goot too; but you have not learnt to get him out. What for you want to go upon the stage, eh? That is no business of mine, you say.'

'I don't say so at all,' answered Philip, laughing, 'and I am quite willing to tell you. I want to make money.'

'Ah—so! It is no caprice, then. To make money?—well, that might be. At concerts, yes;

upon the stage—perhaps.’ He thought for a moment, and then said: ‘I will undertake you, if you choose ; but only upon the condition that you work hardt, and that you sing not anywhere in public until I gif you leaf. When you break one of these rules I make you my bow and wish you goot morning. Is that agreedt?’

Philip consented willingly, and was then admitted as one of Herr Steinberger’s pupils upon terms much more moderate than the great man was in the habit of exacting from fashionable amateurs. For several weeks the new pupil worked as hard as could have been desired, and, finding that he made perceptible progress, enjoyed his work thoroughly. For in art of all kinds it is not *le premier pas qui coûte* ; it is the weary second and third steps, when enough has been learnt to show how many more must be taken before proficiency can be reached, that discourage the faint-hearted and the indolent. To Philip, who was of an essentially sanguine temperament, success seemed not only certain, but close at hand, and he was proportionately joyous.

At Coomassie Villa, too, things were going pleasantly and cheerfully at this time. Aunt Keziah had not yet returned to native Islington; it being essential, as she said, that she should remain for a week or so, in order to watch the

proceedings of the nurse, to whom she had resigned the care of the precious baby ; but she kept herself much in the background, called Philip ‘ Sir ’ when she spoke to him, and was to all appearance disposed to accept the situation in the spirit of a sensible woman. Philip was so much pleased by this change of demeanour that, on the day before that fixed for her departure, he went out and bought her a massive gold bracelet, which peace-offering she accepted with many expressions of humble gratitude. It presently appeared, however, that she had not yet said her last word.

‘ Before I bid you good-night, sir,’ said she, that same evening, ‘ I should be glad to have an answer to the question I made so bold as to arst you three weeks ago.’

‘ My dear Mrs. Webber, I thought I had given you an answer at the time.’

‘ You’ll escuse me, sir, but that is just what you did not do. And a answer I am respeckfully determined for to have.’

‘ Oh, Aunt Keziah, *please !* ’—pleaded Fanny, who was lying on the sofa, and who had become very pink during this speech.

‘ Now, my dear, don’t you worrit yourself. I know my dooty, and your husband will see his, if it’s put to him plain. For close upon a year I’ve held my tongue ; but the time has come now

for him to acknowledge you before the world, and I mean he shall do it too.'

Philip shrugged his shoulders wearily. 'My good Mrs. Webber, what is the use of your bothering me in this way? I told you before that I must decline to discuss the subject with you.'

'Very well, sir; then you will drive me to take measures which it goes against me to take them. To-morrow I write to Mrs. Stanniforth, and I tell her the whole truth. I have her address, you see, sir,' added Mrs. Webber, holding up an envelope which Philip recognised.

'Oho! so you've been reading my letters,' said he.

'A speech which no gentleman would make,' returned Mrs. Webber, with awful calmness. 'No, sir; I have not read your letters, nor wouldn't so bemean myself if it was ever so. But a henvelope is what all the world may look at.' And indeed the envelope in question bore the words Longbourne, Crayminster, in sufficiently large capitals.

Philip had thought it wisest to shroud the whereabouts of his home in mystery, but, with his usual carelessness about matters of detail, had left clear evidence upon the subject on his dressing-table.

'I suppose you know,' he remarked, 'that

there is nothing to prevent Mrs. Stanniforth from cutting me off with a shilling whenever she pleases.'

'I don't think, sir,' answered Mrs. Webber, smiling, 'that she will do that.'

'Well, no; candidly speaking, I don't think she will. She has a weakness for a certain worthless individual, and upon that you appear to have calculated. I may as well tell you, though, that between forgiving me and receiving my wife there is a vast difference. Mrs. Stanniforth, you must know, has a mother who lives with her—an old lady of whom you remind me in many respects, Mrs. Webber. She is quite as stupid as you are, quite as obstinate, and thinks herself quite as sharp. As a bully, she beats you. Make her your enemy, and you might as well try to get Fanny into heaven as inside the doors of Longbourne, so long as she remains there; and she will remain there, I take it, until she dies. Now, Mrs. Webber, I'll be perfectly frank with you. Your writing to Mrs. Stanniforth, as you propose, would give me about as much pain as anything could do. Mrs. Stanniforth is in a good deal of trouble just now, owing to various things that have occurred—that very letter which you are stroking your nose with was written a few days ago to tell me about them—and if this blow comes upon her as an addition to them, I believe

it will very nearly break her heart. That would distress me, and wouldn't do you an atom of good. You probably know enough of your sex to be aware that she would set you down as an interested old schemer, and Fanny, at best, as a willing instrument in your hands. I grant you that she and her mother will have to make the best of what they will consider a bad business in the long run ; but, if you will let me manage things in my own way, they may eventually consent to take Fanny by the hand ; whereas, if you precipitate matters, the chances are that they will refuse to hear her name mentioned, and will use their influence to get me into the Australian police, or something of that kind. Now you can do as you like.'

'Maybe you are speaking the truth,' said Mrs. Webber. 'Lord knows whether you are or not ; but what you say sounds like sense. I shan't interfere without you drive me to it,' she continued, after taking counsel with herself for a minute or two ; 'but mind this : if ever you take it into your head to desert my niece——'

'Aunt Keziah,' cried Fanny, starting up from her couch with her cheeks aflame, 'I won't sit here and let you talk so ! How can you say such wicked things ! You don't understand my Philip one bit.' And she threw her arms round her Philip's neck protectingly.

He disengaged himself gently, saying, 'Lie down again, Fan, and don't agitate yourself. Imitate me : you see I am not agitated. Your Aunt Keziah takes a low view of human nature ; which is to be regretted for everybody's sake, and especially for her own. Try, my dear Mrs. Webber, to rise to a higher moral level, and bear in mind that, as Fanny justly remarks, you don't understand me one bit. That thought may make you easier at times when you are inclined to suspect me of being a consummate villain. Besides, you have got the address, you know.'

'Yes; I've got the address,' said Mrs. Webber, slapping the pocket into which she had thrust Mrs. Stanniforth's envelope.

'So that you will always have it in your power to throw the fat in the fire. That reflection also is likely to be a comfort to you. And now, as there seems to be nothing more to be said, suppose we have some of that mulled claret which you brew so admirably, and drink the baby's health.'

Thus Philip glided lightly away from a peril which had frightened him more than might have been supposed from his manner of treating it.

CHAPTER XV.

MRS. WINNINGTON RECEIVES A SHOCK.

DURING the weeks which Philip had spent agreeably in perfecting himself in the parts of husband, father, and vocalist, time had not stood still at Longbourne. The period, indeed, had been an unusually exciting one in the history of that small world, and had brought about rebellions, battles, conferences, and treaties, all of which must now be in due course recorded.

Mrs. Winnington, whom we left administering a well-deserved lecture to her youngest daughter, was so little relieved by that exercise, and so much put out by the various incidents of the afternoon, that her temper entered upon one of its worst and gloomiest phases ; and even the sudden retirement of Marescalchi, which at ordinary times would have given her great satisfaction, drew nothing more from her than a passing expression of her utter disbelief in his purpose of working either at law or at anything else. Nor did she at all enjoy being left in a great,

silent house, with no one to speak to except her two daughters, neither of whom happened to be a person with whom it was possible to pick a quarrel. From sheer lack of a more worthy antagonist, she fell foul of Mrs. Prosser upon some point of domestic economy, and was routed with great loss ; after which, to Margaret's infinite distress, she took to her bed for twenty-four hours, and sent for the doctor, who unfeelingly ordered her to get up forthwith and go out of doors.

Tom Stanniforth, as in duty bound, walked up, after a day or two, to call upon his sister-in-law ; but, as ill luck would have it, Mrs. Winnington and Edith had selected that very afternoon to pay a round of visits, and consequently missed him. The elder lady's disgust at this *contretemps* was not lessened by the news that Mr. Stanniforth had been persuaded to remain on a few days longer with the Brunes. She still persisted in declaring to herself, as well as to Margaret, that his visit, whether long or short, could have no very serious consequences ; still, having nothing else to think about, she allowed herself to brood over the subject until it became a torment to her, and at last—being a woman to whom inaction was unbearable—she made up her mind to go over to Broom Leas and speak a few words ‘in a friendly way’ to Mr. Brune. The

words that had hitherto passed between her and that gentleman had not commonly been very friendly ones, nor was her feeling towards him of a very friendly nature ; but that, as she pointed out to Margaret, who ventured upon a mild protest against her resolution, ‘ was not the question.’ Accordingly, she requested the use of a carriage for the afternoon, and drove over to Broom Leas in state, not knowing very well, perhaps, what she was going to say when she got there, but feeling that at least it would be a satisfaction to her to be upon the spot.

That it is always well to be ‘ upon the spot ’ was a maxim which had been frequently in Mrs. Winnington’s mouth in the course of a very fairly successful career ; and in truth it was doubtful whether, if she had not been so palpably and unflinchingly upon the spot, in Whitehall and elsewhere, at certain times, her sons would have got on as well in their several professions as they have done.

Mrs. Winnington was by way of being short-sighted ; but her eyes were capable of doing a good stroke of work when any sudden demand was made upon them ; and it so chanced that, as the victoria in which she was seated turned briskly in at the gates of Broom Leas, she distinctly saw a manly form which was familiar to her standing at the entrance of the farmyard in

close proximity to a small and girlish one which she also recognised without difficulty. She saw more than this, for she saw that she was seen ; and she saw worse, for she saw Mr. Stanniforth, in the most barefaced manner, walk away and conceal himself behind an adjacent rick. Nellie came forward, and met her visitor at the front door.

‘How do you do?’ says Mrs. Winnington, alighting slowly, and favouring Miss Brune with a full view of the lowered eyelids and faint smile which with her were the outward and visible signs of an inward and heartfelt superiority. ‘Is your father anywhere about?’

‘Impudent old woman!’ thought Nellie ; ‘what does she mean by speaking to me as if she had come to buy butter and eggs?’ She said aloud, ‘Won’t you come in, Mrs. Winnington? I don’t know where my father is ; but he went out with his gun some time ago, and I hardly expect him back before dark. Do you want to see him about anything in particular?’

‘Oh, no,’ answered Mrs. Winnington ; ‘nothing very particular. If he had been in, I should have liked to ask him whether he had heard anything about the *Octopus* being ordered to the West African station. You know my son has just been appointed to her as first lieutenant, and I understood that one of your brothers had also joined her lately.’

‘The West African station!’ exclaimed Nellie in consternation; ‘oh, I do hope not! No, I am sure we had heard nothing of the kind. When Harry wrote, he said they were to join the Channel fleet.’

‘Perhaps it is not true,’ said Mrs. Winnington, who had in fact invented this pretext for her call upon the spur of the moment; ‘there are always so many absurd rumours going about. As you have heard nothing, it probably is not true. No, I won’t go in, thank you; but, since I am here, I will just take a turn round the garden with you, my dear, if you can spare me a few minutes. I should be rather glad of the opportunity of saying something to you which—which, in fact, I think you ought to be told.’

Nellie opened her eyes rather wide. Never before had she been called ‘my dear’ by Mrs. Winnington, and her imagination failed to suggest to her any clue to the significance of this portent.

‘How neat and tidy your lawn always is!’ said Mrs. Winnington graciously. ‘That is the advantage of a small garden. Now at Longbourne we find that it is next to impossible to keep the grounds in decent order at this time of year. The mere sweeping up of the leaves takes three men all their time from morning to night.’

‘They must be three very lazy men,’ remarked Nellie, who knew as well as anybody how much could be accomplished in a fair day’s work. She could not refrain from adding, ‘There is very nearly as much turf here as at Longbourne.’

‘You don’t say so! Well, I’m sure your gardener deserves every credit. And I notice that you always manage to have a few flowers, too, to make the place look bright. But perhaps Mr. Brune takes an interest in flowers. One so often sees the garden quite neglected in houses where there is no mistress; and that is such a pity.’

‘There is a mistress in this house,’ said Nellie shortly.

‘To be sure there is, my dear,’ rejoined Mrs. Winnington, patting her on the shoulder quite affectionately; ‘but she is a very young mistress, and not a very experienced one. I ought not, perhaps, to have used the word mistress; I was thinking rather of houses where there is no *mother*.’

‘As far as gardening goes, I don’t see why there being no mother should make any great difference,’ observed Nellie. (‘What in the world is she driving at? I hope she’ll come to the point before I lose my temper and say something rude.’)

Mrs. Winnington had her point quite clearly

before her eyes, and, having executed these cumbrous preliminary circlings in the air, was now ready to swoop down upon it.

‘As far as gardening goes!’ she said. ‘But, unfortunately, there are many other ways in which the loss of a mother is an irreparable one.’ Nellie thought that, in the case of some people whom she knew, there might be considerations which would go far towards mitigating the bereavement alluded to; but she had the self-restraint to abstain from saying this: and Mrs. Winnington proceeded.

‘I am so averse to anything that might have the appearance of meddling that I generally prefer to remain silent, even when I feel that a word in season might be of real service; but the question is whether that motive for silence is not really a wrong and selfish one—whether one ought not to think only of doing one’s duty to one’s neighbours—to point out to people when they make themselves ridiculous.’

‘As you would they should do unto you,’ put in Nellie, whose patience was fast ebbing away. ‘If you don’t mind my telling you in what way you seem to me ridiculous, Mrs. Winnington, I can’t object to letting you do as much for me.’

‘My dear, you must remember the difference in our ages. It would be hardly becoming in

you to call me ridiculous, even if I were so ; and that is just one of those things which a mother would enable you to see.'

'I suppose it would be no use to try and stop you, Mrs. Winnington, but I may as well tell you beforehand that, so long as my father does not consider me ridiculous, I shall not trouble myself in the least about what you, or anybody else, may happen to think of me.'

'Ah!' said Mrs. Winnington, 'that is just the spirit in which I expected to be met. That is exactly the sort of speech which a motherless girl would be sure to make. You do not understand now, though you will understand some day, that no one can afford to fly in the face of society. In the present instance your father would naturally be the last man in the world to hear what people are saying about you.'

'And what are people saying about me?' asked Nellie, stopping short and facing Mrs. Winnington, who, however, continued her slow progress across the lawn.

'Well, I must say that I blame your father a little; it is partly his fault. When one has a daughter of your age, one cannot be too particular, and he has been, to say the least of it, thoughtless. I should be sorry to hurt your feelings ; but it is best to tell the truth, and you know one cannot follow up a rich bachelor in that persistent

way without setting people's tongues going. I would not for one moment insinuate that either you or your father knew what you were doing; and as for Mr. Stanniforth, I think I may confidently say on his behalf that he would be very much amused at the idea of his name being coupled with yours. Still the fact remains that he is staying at your house, instead of at Longbourne.'

Nellie was too furious to do more than ejaculate '*Oh!*' under her breath.

'Of course,' continued her companion benevolently, 'it does not matter to *him*; but I know so well what is invariably said in these cases. It is the poor girl who is pitied and laughed at, and——'

'Thank you; that will do,' interrupted Nellie, who had now found her tongue. 'My friends know perfectly well that I would die rather than marry anyone of the name of Stanniforth; and as for other people, it makes no difference to me what they say. It might amuse Mr. Stanniforth to hear his name coupled with mine; but I assure you it would not amuse me at all. Impertinent and false things are said about everybody, I suppose: what I cannot understand is that anyone should have the courage to repeat them to the person of whom they are said.'

Nellie was quite aware that, having thus delivered herself, she would best consult her self-respect by saying no more ; but feminine nature got the better of her, and, after a short and sharp struggle, she added : ‘ You need not be at all alarmed, Mrs. Winnington. Rich as Mr. Stanniforth is, he does not exactly belong to the class into which our family has been accustomed to marry.’

‘ Why, my good girl,’ cried Mrs. Winnington quite unaffectedly and coarsely, ‘ your mother was only a banker’s daughter!’

There was thus a momentary risk of this interview coming to an end in a deplorably vulgar manner ; but happily both combatants saw the danger, and controlled themselves. Mrs. Winnington left rather hastily, but without further loss of dignity, and was upon the whole very well satisfied with the afternoon’s work. Had this rather dull-witted woman been a female Machiavelli, she could hardly have played her cards more adroitly, or have taken more certain means of gaining her end, than she had done ; but, as a matter of fact, no credit for successful diplomacy was due to her upon this occasion. It would never have occurred to her to rescue her intended prey by stirring up Miss Brune’s pride, because it would never have occurred to her to suppose that that young lady could have

any pride—a luxury in which, according to Mrs. Winnington's notions, only the noble and wealthy could afford to indulge. In speaking as she had done, she had been actuated simply and solely by an amiable wish to make the girl uncomfortable. She had herself been made somewhat uncomfortable by Stanniforth's walking behind that haystack under her very eyes and by Nellie's virtual participation in this affront ; and her desire had been to retaliate without delay, and further to let the young woman understand that, whoever might win or lose the prize, it would assuredly not fall to her share. She flattered herself that she had succeeded in both of these noble aims. As for Miss Brune's indignant repudiation of a possible alliance with any Stanniforth whatever, she took that for what she considered it to be worth. The impertinence of it had made her rather angry for the moment ; but, as the thing could obviously have been only said with a view to impertinence, it was hardly worth remembering. The important point was that Mr. Stanniforth was not likely to be pressed to postpone his departure a second time, and that in a day or two he would be restored to his anxious friends at Longbourne. After that, Edith must be made to bestir herself more, and perhaps it might even be well that something in the nature of a conditional engagement should be entered upon

before he left. It will be perceived that Mrs. Winnington herself was not overburdened by any foolish pride.

When she reached home she found the drawing-room and library untenanted, Margaret and Edith having, it was to be presumed, gone out for a walk. Now it was a habit of Mrs. Winnington's, whenever she found the house empty, to prowl all over it, peeping into blotting-books, opening drawers, occasionally going so far as to read letters that might be lying handy, and—as Mrs. Prosser, who hated her with a perfect hatred, would say—‘poking and rummaging about as any under-housemaid that I caught at such tricks should be dismissed immediate, and no character given.’

It is probable that Mrs. Winnington saw no harm at all in such pokings and rummagings. Her daughters, she would have said, had no secrets from her, or at all events ought not to have any. Nor had she any particular end to serve in entering other people's bedrooms. For some occult reason it gave her pleasure to do so, and the present occasion being favourable for the gratifying of her tastes, she proceeded to profit by it. First she made a thorough examination of all the reception rooms ; then she went upstairs, and spent some time in overhauling the contents of Margaret's wardrobe ; and then she

passed on to the room at that time occupied by Edith, which opened out of a long corridor where the family portraits had hung in the days when the owners of Longbourne had possessed a family to be thus commemorated. This corridor had a peculiarity. It terminated in a small gallery, resembling a theatre-box, or one of those pews which are still to be met with in a few old-fashioned churches, whence you looked down upon a curious apse-like chamber, tacked on to the house by a seventeenth-century Brune for some purpose unknown. It may have been intended to serve as a theatre, or possibly as a private chapel: of late years it had fallen into disuse, being a gloomy and ill-lighted apartment, and was seldom entered by anybody, except by the housemaids who swept it out from time to time. Some one, however, was in it now. Mrs. Winnington with her hand on the lock of her daughter's door, was startled by the sound of voices arising from that quarter, and it was a matter of course that she should at once make her way along the passage as stealthily as might be, and peer over the edge of the gallery to see what might be going on below.

She arrived in time to witness a scene so startling that she very nearly put a dramatic finish to it then and there by falling headlong over the balustrade, which was a low one. Upon

an ottoman directly beneath her, her daughter Edith was sitting in a very pretty and graceful attitude, her elbow resting on her knee and her face hidden by her right hand, while her left was held by Walter Brune, who was kneeling at her feet. And this is what that audacious young reprobate was saying, in accents which rose towards the roof with perfect distinctness:—

‘Now, my darling girl, you must not allow yourself to be so cowed by that awful old mother of yours. There! I beg your pardon: I didn’t intend to speak disrespectfully of her, but it came out before I could stop myself. What I mean is, you mustn’t let her bully you to that extent that you daren’t call your soul your own. Stand up to her boldly, and depend upon it she’ll knock under in the long run. When all’s said and done, she can’t eat you alive.’

The feelings of the astounded listener overhead may be imagined.

‘Ah, you don’t understand,’ sighed Edith. ‘It is easy enough for a man to talk of standing up for himself; but you don’t consider how different it is with us.’

‘But I do understand—I do consider,’ declared Walter, scrambling up to his feet. ‘I know it’s awfully hard upon you, my dearest; but wouldn’t it be harder still to marry some decrepid old lord to please your mother, and to be

miserable and ashamed of yourself for the rest of your life?’

At this terrible picture Edith shuddered eloquently.

‘So you see it’s a choice of evils,’ continued the young man. ‘Some people, I know, would think it was a great misfortune for you that you should have come to care for a poor beggar like me; but I am not going to say that, because I don’t believe it is a real misfortune at all. How can it be a misfortune to love the man who loves you better than anyone else in the world can possibly do, and who will always love you just the same as long as he lives?’ (‘Upon my word!’ ejaculated Mrs. Winnington inaudibly.)

‘Of course,’ Walter went on, ‘we shall have troubles, and probably we shall have to wait a good many years; but we are young, and we can afford to wait, if we must. You won’t mind waiting?’

‘Oh, no; it is not the waiting that I shall mind,’ said Edith faintly.

‘And we know that it won’t be for ever, and that nothing can make either of us change. When one thinks of that, all the rest seems almost plain sailing. The first explosion will be the worst part of the business. I shall tell my father to-night.’

‘Oh, must you?—so soon? What *will* he say?’

‘He? Oh, he won’t say much, dear old man. I dare say he won’t exactly approve just at first; but when he sees that I am in earnest, he’ll do what he can to help me. And then, you know, my dear, you’ll have to tell your mother.’

‘Walter, I can’t. I really *could not* do it. You have really no idea of what a coward I am. I always lie awake shivering all night before I go to the dentist’s; and, indeed, I would’ rather have all my teeth pulled out, one by one, than tell mamma that I had engaged myself to you.’

At this juncture it was only natural that the young lovers should embrace; and if Mrs. Winnington had not been literally stunned and paralysed, she could hardly have maintained her silence any longer in the presence of such a demonstration. As it was, she neither moved nor uttered a word; and presently she heard Edith whisper pleadingly—

‘Walter—dear—don’t you think we could—mightn’t we—keep it a secret just a little longer?’

The honest Walter rubbed his ear in perplexity. ‘Well, of course we *could*; but it would be only a putting off of the evil day, and I should like to feel that we had been perfectly straight

with the old—with your mother. Look here ; how would it do if I were to break it to her?’

‘Oh, that would be a great deal worse! If only there were some means of letting her find it out!’

Hardly had this aspiration been breathed when a hollow groan was heard, proceeding apparently from the upper air. Edith started violently, and clasped her hands.

‘Oh!’ she shrieked, ‘what was that? Did you hear it?’

‘Yes,’ answered Walter, who had himself been somewhat startled; ‘it was nothing; it was only one of the cows outside. What a timid little goose you are!’

‘Oh, it was not a cow! No cow ever made such a dreadful sound as that. I am sure this dismal room is haunted.—I can’t stay here any more.’ And Edith fled precipitately.

Walter lingered for a moment, looked all round him, looked up at the ceiling, looked everywhere, except at the gallery just over his head, and then hurried away after her.

The cause of all this disturbance was reclining in an arm-chair, fanning herself with her pocket-handkerchief, and feeling by no means sure that she was not about to have a fit.

It is perhaps hardly to be expected that any pity or sympathy should be felt for Mrs. Win-

nington, who, nevertheless, was a human creature very much like the rest of us—better, possibly, than some, and no worse than a good many others. In the course of the present narrative her failings have necessarily been brought much to the front ; but she was not one of those depraved persons—if indeed there be any such—who deliberately say to Evil, ‘Be thou my Good.’ She was not a religious woman (though she had always paid due respect to the observances of the Church, as beseemed a Bishop’s wife); but neither was she a woman without clear, albeit perverted, notions of duty. That she was a miserable sinner, she was bound, in a general sort of way, to believe ; but she certainly did not suppose that her sins were any blacker than those of her neighbours. According to her lights, she had done the best that she could for her daughters, whom she really loved after a certain fashion ; and, according to her lights, she intended to continue doing the best she could for them. It is a fact that she thought a great deal more about them than she did about herself. Thus it was that she was every whit as much astonished and pained by what she had witnessed as the most virtuous mother into whose hands this book may chance to fall, would be, were she to discover her own immaculate daughter in the act of embracing—say the

parish doctor, or the poverty-stricken parish curate.

‘I could not have believed it!’ moaned poor Mrs. Winnington, as she sat humped up in her arm-chair, with all her majesty of deportment gone out of her. ‘I could not have believed it possible! Edith, of all people! If it had been Kate, or even Margaret, I could have understood it better—but Edith! Oh, I am crushed!—I shall never get over this.’

She really looked and felt as if she might be going to have a serious attack of illness; but as there was nobody there to be alarmed, or to offer her assistance, she picked herself up after a time, and made her way down the corridor with a slow, dragging step. Being still in her walking dress, she thought she would go out and see what a breath of fresh air would do for her. She did not, however, get further than the front door; for, just as she was about to let herself out, who should run briskly up the steps but Mr. Brune!

‘Is that Mrs. Winnington?’ said he. ‘How do you do, Mrs. Winnington? Do you know whether my boy Walter is here? Somebody told me he had gone up to Longbourne, and I rather want to see him; so I thought I would just look—— Why what’s the matter?’ he broke off, for the first time noticing the

lady's woebegone face ; 'has anything happened ?'

'Your son is here,' answered Mrs. Winnington, in a deep tragic voice worthy of Mrs. Siddons. 'Yes, Mr. Brune ; something has indeed happened. No, not an accident ; don't jump about, there's a good man ; my nerves are completely unstrung. As we have met, I may as well tell you about it at once. If you are not in a hurry, perhaps you will give me a few minutes in private.'

'By all means, Mrs. Winnington ; but hadn't you better let me get you a glass of wine first ? You look quite grey.'

Mrs. Winnington shook her head ; but Mr. Brune thought it best to take the law into his own hands, and rang the door-bell. After a glass of port wine Mrs. Winnington's complexion began slowly to regain its normal florid aspect, and she was able to assume something of her customary stateliness of demeanour in motioning her companion to follow her into a small room on the ground floor which was sometimes used as a study by Philip, and where she could feel tolerably safe from intrusion.

'Now, Mr. Brune,' she began, seating herself opposite to him, 'I will say at once that I acquit you of all blame in this scandalous business. I feel sure that when you have heard

what I have to tell you, you will be as much grieved and horrified as I have been.'

'It shall be my endeavour not to disappoint you,' answered he.

Mrs. Winnington paused. 'I can assure you,' she said at length, 'that I feel the—the disgrace of all this very keenly. Really I hardly know how to begin.'

'Suppose you take a little more wine,' suggested Mr. Brune, who had been alarmed for a moment, but who now began to suspect that nothing very terrible was the matter after all.

'No, thank you. It is very disagreeable to have to tell it; but you will understand, of course, that I am speaking to you in the strictest confidence, and I count upon your honour to let what I say go no further.'

And then Mrs. Winnington related what had taken place between Walter and Edith in her presence, suppressing nothing, except that interchange of kisses which respect for her daughter forbade her to mention.

'Ah,' remarked Mr. Brune, coolly, when she had concluded her recital, 'I thought something of this kind would probably occur sooner or later.'

'You did?' exclaimed Mrs. Winnington, now quite restored to her natural self. 'Then I

must say Mr. Brune, that you have been rather——Well, I did *not* expect to hear this!’

‘What would you have had me do?’ asked her interlocutor, perhaps rather enjoying the discomfiture of this veteran match-maker. ‘Naturally I am sorry that Walter should have fixed his affections upon a penniless girl, for I cannot by any possibility find him a sufficient income to marry upon; but I never suspected anything until it was much too late for interference to do any good.’

This was a view of the case which had not presented itself to Mrs. Winnington. She had expected that Mr. Brune, if he did not make an absolute apology, would at least be apologetic in his manner, and, lo and behold! he was taking up a tone of complete equality. And the worst of it was that she could not very well see how he was to be put to silence; for it was certainly true that Edith was penniless.

‘I need not point out to you,’ she said, smothering her indignation, ‘that a stop must be put to this immediately.’

‘I suppose so. I am sorry for the poor boy—and for the poor girl too, for that matter; but we can only hope that they will both get over it.’

‘Edith undoubtedly will. She is a mere child; she has been led into folly and deceit by

one in whom I had unwisely placed implicit trust,' cried Mrs. Winnington, who could not refuse herself the satisfaction of making this rather unjust accusation. 'Of course,' she added, 'you will at once let your son understand that he is not to hold any sort of communication with her in future, beyond what is necessary in order to avoid exciting remark, and that, as far as possible, he must abstain from going anywhere where he is likely to meet her.'

'I am not sure,' answered Mr. Brune, 'that I am prepared to take such authoritative measures as that. Neither you nor I, Mrs. Winnington, desire this match; but you see, we don't happen to be the principal persons concerned; and if we can't be generous, we may at least be just. So far as one can see, there is no likelihood that these young people will ever be able to marry, and, if they ask me my advice, I should recommend them without hesitation to give each other up; but supposing, for the sake of argument, that they chose to exchange promises of fidelity, and to wait for better times, I don't think that I, for my part, should consider myself justified in forbidding an engagement. You, of course, can do what you think proper; I am only speaking of my own possible action. Walter has been a good son to me, and I shall not cross him in any way that I can help.'

Mrs. Winnington started to her feet in a fury. 'I declare, Mr. Brune,' she exclaimed, 'I don't know whether to call you weak or wicked!'

'Call me what you please, my dear lady,' replied Mr. Brune, who had also risen; 'or call me both, if you think it would relieve your feelings at all to do so. Vituperation, however, will scarcely help us to arrive at a clearer understanding; and indeed I believe we understand each other quite clearly as it is. So, unless you have anything more of a practical nature to suggest, I shall wish you good evening.'

When he was gone, Mrs. Winnington sank back into her chair which she had just vacated, and raised her clasped hands to heaven.

'Oh,' she exclaimed, 'what a world we live in! Everybody is false, everybody is selfish; it makes one feel as if one would never be able to believe in anyone but oneself again!'

The amusing part of it is that she was perfectly sincere.

CHAPTER XVI.

MATERNAL INFLUENCE.

WHEN Mr. Brune escaped from the presence of the justly incensed Mrs. Winnington, he shaped his course for home without further delay. Under the circumstances, he no longer cared to search the house for his son, being in some fear of drifting into an embarrassing situation, and thinking, too, that it would be best to let the young fellow choose his own time for making any revelations that might have to be made.

He had not, however, proceeded very far on his way through the gathering gloom when he was arrested by a shrill whistle ; immediately after which some one crossed the adjacent meadow at a slinging trot, and, taking the hedgerow in his stride, landed neatly in the muddy lane.

‘ Oh, there you are ! ’ said Mr. Brune. ‘ They told me you were up at the house, but I couldn’t find you anywhere about.’

‘ I saw you starting ; so I thought I might

as well catch you up,' answered Walter, passing his arm through his father's ; and so they walked on for a couple of hundred yards or so in silence.

' I say——' began Walter at length.

' Well ; what do you say ?'

Facility of expression had never been among Walter's gifts. He thought for a little longer, and then made a fresh start with—

' I—er—I've got a sort of a secret to tell you.'

' Ah !' remarked Mr. Brune, ' you may well say a sort of a secret. A secret, I take it, is a matter known, at the most, to two persons ; when a third is let in, it becomes, as you say, a sort of a secret ; but when an interested party happens to have overheard the whole business from beginning to end, it is no longer any sort of a secret at all.'

' Eh ?'

' You need not give yourself the agony of searching for appropriate words in which to tell your tale. I have heard it already—and several details which I fancy you would not have thought it necessary to communicate to me into the bargain. What possessed you to choose that room of all others in the house to make a declaration in ? I remember that, when I was a boy, I used often to creep to the end of the corridor in hopes of seeing some exciting episode take place

beneath me ; but nothing ever came of it. Mrs. Winnington has had better luck.'

'Mrs. Winnington ? Good Lord ! She wasn't there when—when——'

'She was, though—didn't miss a word of it. And now that I begin to realise what the scene must have been, I can't help wishing that I too could have been concealed somewhere and watched her face,' said Mr. Brune, bursting into a hearty laugh.

'Oh, it's all very well to laugh,' remonstrated Walter ; 'but this is serious.'

'The whole thing is undoubtedly serious,' answered Mr. Brune, recovering his gravity. 'At the same time, I don't know that the way in which Mrs. Winnington and I have come to a knowledge of it is not as good a one as another. It has saved a world of gradual explanations.'

'Is she awfully angry ?'

'Well, yes ; she is rather angry, I believe ; but that should hardly surprise you.'

'Poor Edith !' muttered Walter ; 'how she will catch it ! I have a sort of feeling that I ought to go back to the house at once.'

'I have a sort of feeling that you will do no such thing, so long as I can hold you,' returned Mr. Brune, keeping a firm grip of his son's arm. 'My dear boy, you must allow parents and children to settle their differences between them—'

selves. And, talking of that, doesn't it strike you that I may have a word or two to say to your marriage—or rather engagement ?'

'Oh, of course. In fact, I was just going to tell you all about it. I know,' continued Walter penitently, 'that I have no business to think about marrying at all ; but—but, in short, I couldn't help it.'

'You have done what can't be helped now, at all events,' observed Mr. Brune. 'I don't blame you,' he resumed, after a pause. 'A son who has never troubled his father in any worse way than by falling in love with a girl who hasn't a sixpence, and who has an outrageous old mother, must be allowed to be a success, as sons go, and can fairly claim some indulgence. But, setting that consideration aside, it is a very open question whether I have any right at all to interfere with your plans, except as a friendly adviser. When you were a boy, you know, I used to make you obey me, and never allowed you to ask questions or begin your sentences with a But.'

Walter nodded. 'It's the only way,' he said.

'It is gratifying to me to have your approval,' said Mr. Brune gravely. 'Well, so long as it was necessary that I should be master, I believe I was a tolerably strict one ; but

a time always arrives when the old bird's functions come to an end, and the young ones must fly for themselves and shift for themselves. There isn't room for you in the old nest, and you must feather a new one as best you can. Or again, if you prefer a nest without feathers, what can I say ? I can give you the benefit of my experience as to the comfort of nests of that description ; but it isn't much use for me to scold.'

'Bless you ! you couldn't scold if you were to try for a twelvemonth,' said Walter, giving his father's arm a squeeze ; 'you don't know the way.'

'Anyhow, I am not going to scold. Nor am I going to remonstrate. Indeed, if there came to be a question of remonstrances between us, I am half afraid that it would be for me to receive, not to utter, them. I have not done my duty by you, Walter ; though I believe I may say that I have intended to do it—if that is any excuse.'

'My dear old man, what are you talking about ? You have been the kindest father and the best friend any fellow could wish for,' cried Walter warmly.

'Ah, well ! you have a case against me all the same. Things have not fallen out quite as they seemed likely to do when your mother and

I agreed that you were to succeed me at the farm, instead of entering a profession like your brothers. To a certain extent I have been unfortunate ; that is to say that I have neither made nor inherited what I expected to do ; but, on the other hand, I have muddled away a lot of money. The upshot of it all is that, instead of being very comfortably off, I am a poor man and shall never be anything else. I hear people talk of making farming pay ; but I can't say I have ever yet met a man who has accomplished the feat.'

'I defy any man to make farming pay in these days,' said Walter confidently.

'Well ; but don't you see what this brings us to? The only thing that could enable you to support a wife and family would be my death ; and goodness only knows how long I may not live. I am as strong as a horse and barely past the half-century.'

'I only wish you may live another fifty years.'

'Thank you very much ; but fifty years is rather a long period to propose to a young lady for an engagement. How are you going to get out of that difficulty?'

Walter scratched his head, and answered with much candour that he was hanged if he knew.

Then Mr. Brune pulled a letter out of his pocket. 'The afternoon post brought me this,' he said, 'and I was going to show it to you before I heard anything about your love affairs. It is from William Boulger—your uncle William, whom you have heard of, but never seen, and who is now senior partner in the firm of Boulger & Co.—and he writes to offer an opening in the bank to one of my sons. He means one of the younger ones, no doubt, and I suppose the fact of the matter is that he has been quarrelling with his own people. A few years ago I should have said No, thank you; but now things look so bad that I thought I ought at least to let you hear of the proposal before declining it. As far as I understand him, it is only a clerkship that he offers; but he alludes to 'probable advancement in life,' which, I conclude, means eventual partnership. Now William Boulger is, or used to be, an infernally disagreeable fellow; but he is a man of business and a man of his word, and the chances are that, if anything, he means more than he says, rather than less. I think the matter might be worth your considering.'

'My dear father,' exclaimed Walter, 'it is the very thing. What a stroke of luck! Write off to the old boy, and tell him I'm his man. I don't mind confessing to you now that I *was* a

little bit down about my prospects ; but this will put everything right, depend upon it.'

Even in that uncertain light Walter could see that his father was looking at him in an odd, wistful way.

'What is it?' he asked. 'You think I shan't like the sort of work, eh?'

'My poor fellow, I don't think about it ; I know you will utterly hate and abhor it. You, who love the open air and the smell of the fields almost as much as I do, and outdoor sports a great deal more than I ever did—you to sit upon a high stool in the city, totting up figures from morning to night ! Even the prospect of your dying a rich man could never reconcile me to such a notion.'

'I should be doing it with an object,' said Walter quickly.

'Well, yes ; there's that. And you can always throw it up, and return to your crust of bread and liberty. I want you to promise me, my boy, that you will do that, if you find the life intolerable. But I think, upon the whole, you would do wisely to accept the offer. You would be none the worse off for having given the thing a trial, and living in London will give you an insight into the ways of the world which you could never have acquired if you had vegetated down at Broom Leas all the days of your

life. Only pray bear in mind that you will always have it in your power to escape.'

'And Edith?' said Walter, smiling.

'Ah—that indeed!'

Mr. Brune did not choose to tell his son how very little belief he had in the successful termination of that affair; still less was he disposed to try and convince the young fellow that this world only exists by virtue of continual change, that when the course of true love does not run smooth it very commonly ceases to run at all, and that nobody is much the worse after a year or two. There are things that one does not say to women and children; and there are also things—this, at least, was Mr. Brune's view—that ought not to be said to young men. Innocence is sacred; and should not the illusions and enthusiasms of youth be sacred too?

Quand j'ai connu la vérité,
J'ai cru que c'était une amie ;
Quand je l'ai comprise et sentie,
J'en étais déjà dégoûté.

Et pourtant elle est éternelle,
Et ceux qui se sont passés d'elle
Ici-bas ont tout ignoré.

As a man grows older he inevitably learns much respecting his own nature and that of his fellow-mortals which can hardly heighten his respect for the race; and probably few would care to

surrender that sad knowledge ; but who, on looking back, would wish that he had known at the age of twenty-three all that he knows now ?

Mr. Brune, then, held his peace ; and as for Walter, he spent the remainder of the evening in golden dreams, towards the realisation of which the obnoxious high stool was to act as a stepping-stone. The evening—if he had been in a frame of mind to pay attention to trifles—was not being passed in a very cheerful manner by the trio who sat round the fire near him ; for Mr. Brune was silent and thoughtful, and Nellie, for some unexplained reason, thought fit to demean herself towards Mr. Stanniforth in such an exceedingly cold and haughty fashion that she succeeded at length in driving that good-natured and mystified gentleman clean out of the room to seek solace in tobacco. Walter may be pardoned for having failed to notice this by-play. He went up to bed in an exuberantly hopeful mood, and dreamt that he was senior partner in Boulger's bank, that he had just purchased back the estate of his forefathers, and that he was consulting Edith as to whether, when he got his peerage, he should call himself Lord Brune or Lord Longbourne.

The next morning, while he was smoking his pipe in the stable-yard after breakfast, a groom

from Longbourne rode up, and delivered to him a note addressed in feminine handwriting, which brought his foolish heart up into his mouth.

‘I was to wait for an answer, if you please, sir,’ said the man.

Walter moved away a few paces and tore open his letter, which did not prove to be from Edith, as he had half hoped that it might be ; nor were its contents of a nature to raise an anxious lover’s spirits. ‘Mrs. Winnington presents her compliments to Mr. Walter Brune, and would be glad to see him for a few minutes, if he will be so good as to call upon her between eleven and twelve o’clock this morning.’

Walter faced about, and walked back to the groom. ‘Say, Mr. Walter Brune’s compliments, and he’ll turn up all right.’

And shortly after having despatched this informal reply, our young friend set out in obedience to Mrs. Winnington’s summons. He was not much alarmed, but rather amused, at the absurdity of her writing to him in the third person. It seemed to him that she could not have felt her position to be an impregnable one when she threw up that flimsy species of earth-work. The fact was that he had been so accustomed to hearing Mrs. Winnington laughed at and made a fool of by Marescalchi that he hardly did justice to the good lady’s inexorable will and

strength of purpose, and had got a sadly mistaken notion into his head that, if he were only firm with her, she would falter and give way.

Yet, for all his stout-heartedness, he felt his hands growing cold and a sinking sensation about the region of the waistcoat as he drew nearer to the house. He had an uncomfortable suspicion that the butler, who admitted him, knew all; and when he was ushered into the same small room in which his father had been engaged with the enemy on the previous evening, he knew that he was looking defiant, and by no means wore that aspect of calm and courteous determination which he would fain have assumed.

Mrs. Winnington was sitting by the fire, reading the *Times*, and at a short distance off, Edith, with her back turned, was gazing intently out of the window at a large spruce fir, the lower branches of which darkened the room. Walter had a moment of hesitation, not having been prepared to meet Edith, and being in some uncertainty as to the manner in which he ought to greet her. He got out of the difficulty by not greeting her at all—a course which she made the easier for him by never turning her head nor manifesting the slightest consciousness of his presence.

Mrs. Winnington rose with much majesty to

her full height, and Walter, to show that he was not frightened, held out his hand, saying cheerfully, 'Good morning.'

But both the lady's hands were engaged in holding her newspaper, over which she bowed in a stately fashion, without speaking. Walter remained standing before her, thinking that he would allow her to fire the first shot; but as she chose to maintain a frigid silence, he presently took upon himself to open the proceedings by plunging *in medias res* with—

'I'm afraid you're not best pleased with me, Mrs. Winnington.'

'Will you sit down?' she said, not deigning to notice his observation; and the young man took the chair pointed out to him, and sat with his elbows on his knees, twirling his hat, and wishing, perhaps, that the next quarter of an hour were well over.

'I need scarcely tell you,' began Mrs. Winnington, 'that it is not very pleasant to me to receive you, after what has occurred; but I have sent for you because it seemed to me desirable that our respective positions should be—er——'

'That we should know where we are, in short,' suggested Walter, by way of helping her out in a friendly spirit.

Mrs. Winnington gave him one glance of

mingled disgust and disdain, but did not refuse to accept the interpolation. 'You will probably agree with me,' she went on, 'that what has to be said had better be said in the fewest possible words. I shall purposely abstain from any comment upon your behaviour——'

'I should like you just to admit, though, that I have done the straight thing as far as you are concerned,' interrupted Walter. 'You are displeased and disappointed, and I'm sure I don't wonder at it; but when you speak of my behaviour, I think you ought to allow that I have not been guilty of any deception.'

'Not guilty of any deception!' cried Mrs. Winnington, reddening. 'Well, I can only say that I think you have behaved as deceitfully and dishonourably as——' Here, however, she came to a full stop. She was aware that she could not lose her temper without at the same time losing something of her dignity, and the occasion was one upon which dignity must be allowed to have the pre-eminence. 'But that is not the question,' she said, waving the subject away with a lofty sweep of the *Times*.

'Pardon me, but to my mind it is very much the question.'

'Not the question,' repeated Mrs. Winnington with increased emphasis. 'It was not to put you upon your defence, or to listen to it,

that I requested you to call here this morning. I am willing to take the most charitable view of the case, and to assume that you have, or think you have, a real attachment for my daughter.' Mrs. Winnington brought out these last words with rather a wry face ; but she had considered beforehand what she should say, and was resolute not to swerve from her line of attack. ' And if that be so,' she continued, ' you will certainly not wish to cause her any needless pain or distress. It surely cannot be necessary that I should even mention such a thing as the possibility of your becoming engaged to her ; your common sense will tell you that no father or mother could sanction an engagement where there were neither means nor prospect of any on one side or the other. The whole thing is a foolish boy-and-girl scrape which I am sure we should all be glad to forget. Edith has expressed to me her sincere regret and penitence' (here Walter started, and glanced at the figure by the window, which, he fancied, shivered ever so slightly), ' and—in fact it is a case of least said soonest mended. Fortunately very few people know of the affair. Your father has been told of it, and for several reasons I thought it best also to tell my daughter Margaret, who is very anxious that there should be no breach between us and your father's family in consequence ; but

it need never, I should hope, go further. I cannot truly say that we shall be glad to see you often after this, and probably your own good feeling will prompt you to keep out of the way; but occasional chance meetings between you and Edith can hardly be prevented, and I wish you to give me your honour in her presence that you will never, by word or look, recur to—to what is past.'

Walter was a good deal disconcerted. For anger and abuse he had been prepared, but not for the tone of studious moderation which Mrs. Winnington had seen fit to adopt, and remembering that, not so many hours before, he had called her an awful old woman in her hearing, and had kissed her daughter under her very nose, he could not but feel that her self-restraint placed him at a considerable disadvantage. He was conscious, too, that, according to all received ideas, her case was a strong one, and his own a deplorably weak one.

'I'm not much of a hand at argument,' he confessed at length, 'and I can't put things as forcibly as you do, Mrs. Winnington. All the same I have something to say for myself, and I dare say I shall manage to get it said, if you'll give me time. As to my having no money, I'm afraid that's undeniable; and yesterday I couldn't have pretended that I had anything in the way of prospects to look forward to either; but, oddly

enough, there has been a little change since then. My uncle—old Boulger, you know—has offered me a clerkship in his bank, and I've made up my mind to take it. I admit that that doesn't mean much pay for some years; but I believe he means to push me on, if I'm good, and I think I may fairly say that I have a chance of being comfortably off some day. I suppose I shall go up to London almost immediately, and never get away, except on Bank holidays, so there won't be much risk of those chance meetings that you mentioned.'

Mrs. Winnington could not repress a faint murmur of satisfaction.

'All this is awfully vague, I know,' Walter continued, 'and perhaps I ought not to expect you to sanction a regular engagement, but——' Here a short laugh from Mrs. Winnington arrested him, and he looked up inquiringly.

'Oh, go on, pray go on,' said she; 'it is quite diverting to listen to you. You would prefer an irregular engagement, I suppose.'

'What I was going to say was this: I must acknowledge that, under the circumstances, you have every right to send me about my business, but, for all that, I can't give Edith up at your bidding.'

'Really,' said Mrs. Winnington, 'I do not understand you.'

‘Well, then, I must try to speak more plainly. I love Edith, and I know that she loves me; and, so long as that is so, I shall consider that we are bound to one another, though we may not be formally engaged. To tell you the truth, Mrs. Winnington, I have my doubts about her ever having expressed repentance to you in the way that you say she did. She may have told you that she was sorry for having vexed you, or that you should have overheard something of what passed between us yesterday; but that she ever said more than that is what I cannot believe.’

‘You are very insolent,’ returned Mrs. Winnington coldly; ‘but I suppose I must bear with you up to the end. Edith, my love, I wish I could avoid paining you; but I am afraid you will have to tell this—very extraordinary young gentleman that you wish to recall any foolish promise that he may have extorted from you.’

Upon this Edith at last turned round, and Walter eagerly scanned her features. She was very pale; but she had not been crying, as her lover half hoped, half feared that she might have been, and when she spoke, it was in a steady, monotonous voice. She did not, however, once raise her eyes from the carpet.

‘We must part, Walter,’ she said: ‘we have made a mistake. You know,’ she added pre-

sently, 'I always told you that it was impossible—that it could not be.'

'It can be, and it will be,' cried Walter, who had now also turned rather white, 'if we only have the pluck to be true to ourselves and to one another. It is not of your own free will that you are turning me off like this. Edith, look at me!—listen! I don't ask you to bind yourself formally; I don't even ask to see you, or to be allowed to write to you. I only entreat you to have patience and to wait. That sounds like asking a great deal; but if you really love me, it is asking nothing. I won't give up hope until I hear from your own lips that you don't care enough for me to bear a time of uncertainty and waiting.'

'Edith!' said Mrs. Winnington solemnly.

The girl looked up, cast an imploring glance first at her mother and then at Walter, and dropped her eyes again, but said never a word.

'Edith!' repeated the instrument of destiny by the fireplace, in somewhat sterner accents.

This time the victim responded to the call. 'It is quite true,' she said slowly, 'I don't care enough——' Her voice died away. Then, all of a sudden, she exclaimed passionately, 'Oh, why can't you believe what I say? Why don't you go away? You ought not to persecute me so!'

‘I hope,’ said Mrs. Winnington quietly, ‘that you are now satisfied.’

Poor Walter was not in a state to make any reply. The floor seemed to be rising and falling before him; the walls were spinning round; he had to clutch at the mantelpiece for support. There was a long minute of profound silence, after which he heard Mrs. Winnington’s voice, as from the far distance, saying, ‘Don’t you think you had better leave us now?’

He made a strong effort to recover his self-command. ‘Certainly,’ he answered. ‘I have nothing more to do here. It—it’s a pity this wasn’t said a little sooner. I had no intention of—persecuting anybody. Good-bye, Mrs. Winnington. Good-bye, Edith, and God bless you always!’

And so, somehow or other, he found himself out in the hall, and was aware that the butler was surveying him with an air of grave surprise.

‘Good-bye, Wilson,’ he said; ‘you won’t see me down here again for many a long day, I expect. I’m going up to London to make my fortune, Wilson.’

‘Indeed, sir? I am sorry hear it, sir,’ answered the man.

‘What, sorry to hear that I am going to make my fortune? You must know precious little of the world then, Wilson. Why, bless

your soul, money is the only thing worth living for. There's nothing that money can't buy—houses, and lands, and friends, and wives, too, if you want them. Between you and me, Wilson, this world's going to the devil pretty quickly.'

Probably Wilson knew perfectly well what was the matter ; otherwise he might have been inclined to suspect that young Mr. Brune had been drinking a little more than was good for him. And indeed Walter's gait, as he hastened across the lawn, was scarcely that of a sober man.

Before he had reached the boundary of the garden some one appeared suddenly from a by-path, and caught him by both hands.

'Oh, Walter !' exclaimed Margaret, with the tears in her eyes, 'I am so very, very sorry.'

Possibly there may have been something like tears in the young fellow's eyes, too ; for he winked violently, and cleared his voice several times, without being able to make any articulate reply.

'I know that I have been a great deal to blame for this,' Margaret went on penitently. 'I ought to have foreseen what was likely to happen ; but somehow I never thought of it until—until a short time ago.'

Walter now managed to say that he had nothing to complain of, and blamed nobody. He had made a great mistake, and there was no more to be said.

Certainly there was not much to be said in the way of consolation. Had Walter declared himself determined to hope on against hope, Mrs. Stanniforth would have been ready to point out to him how wrong this was, and might even have been persuaded in the long run to write to him, every now and then, and let him have news of the beloved one's state of health—a point upon which he might reasonably be supposed to feel some anxiety; but as he chose to give up the game, it was not for her to quarrel with his submissiveness, and no doubt, matters being as they were, it was a good thing that he was about to vanish altogether from the scene. Margaret may have been inwardly a trifle disappointed; but she did not allow the existence of any such feeling to be inferred from her manner, and Walter gave her no time to add much more, one way or the other. He made her a somewhat incoherent speech, thanking her for all her kindness to him in past years, and hoping that she would not forget him, and so departed.

Margaret watched him out of sight, and then returned to the house, where her mother met her with—

‘All’s well that ends well. But, Margaret dear, I can’t help saying that I hope this will be a warning to you to be just a little more careful about making all sorts of people welcome to the house. If anything of this kind were to occur again, I am afraid it would be my duty to think seriously of settling down with dear Edith in a home of our own.’

CHAPTER XVII.

NELLIE SPENDS AN EXCITING DAY.

It is so common a failing, even among the wisest of mankind, to estimate what is probable by the measure of what is desirable, that Mrs. Winnington may be excused for having cherished a fond belief that all cognisance of the episode treated of in the last chapter might be confined to the five persons whom she knew to be already acquainted with it. No one, however, who has lived much in the country will suppose for one moment that a popular and widely-known young fellow like Walter Brune could leave the neighbourhood abruptly in order to seek employment in London, for which, both by tastes and training, he was notoriously unfitted—no one, I say, will believe that such a step as this could be taken without reasons, true and false, being speedily forthcoming to account for it. In this instance, the truth, or something not very unlike the truth, was known to the whole county in about a

week ;—in a space of time, that is to say, which would include one Sunday, one market-day, and at least one dinner-party, or other social gathering. Mr. Wilson, it may be assumed, would give his version of the affair to one set of persons, Mrs. Winnington's maid would communicate hers to another, while the groom who had ridden over to Broom Leas with the note for Walter would command the attention of a third. Starting from these humble sources the news would infiltrate by the usual processes into a higher layer of society, and propagating itself by the mere fact of its existence, as the germs of certain diseases are said to do, would ere long penetrate into the most remote and least inquisitive quarters.

Thus it was that, within the brief period above indicated, a very general impression got abroad to the effect that poor young Brune had been abominably treated. His father, it was alleged, had turned him out of doors ; Mrs. Stanniforth had forbidden him ever to show his face at Longbourne again ; Mrs. Winnington had assailed him with a torrent of the coarsest abuse ; and all this because, forsooth, he had ventured to raise his eyes to a girl who, after all, was in no way his superior, and who surely might have been contented with throwing him over when he had served her purpose of acting

as a decoy-duck for more wary and wealthier suitors. It was unanimously concluded that the affair was discreditable to all concerned in it; and, as this is always a comfortable conclusion to arrive at, Walter's wrongs were discussed for a longer time and with greater relish than anybody's good fortune would have been.

It was well for Mrs. Winnington that she was both disliked and feared in the county, and that she had no friend within twenty miles sufficiently intimate to undertake the delightful task of letting her know what pleasant things were being said about her. She was perfectly at ease in her mind, feeling assured that those in whom she had confided would best consult their own interest by keeping silence; and what better security for discretion could she have than that? Mr. Brune, if she had known it, had taken upon himself to let a sixth person into the secret; but that person was a safe one, and moreover could hardly have been kept long in ignorance of what had taken place.

Nellie showed no surprise when her father related the circumstances to her, but expressed herself upon the subject with a bitterness which rather astonished him, declaring that Walter was well out of it, and passing a sweeping condemnation upon the entire Longbourne set, Stanniforths and Winningtons alike.

‘How horrid they all are!’ she exclaimed; ‘Edith is not a bit better than the rest of them. Even Mrs. Stanniforth, good and kind as she is, is completely under the thumb of that detestable woman, and did not dare to say a word for poor Walter, whom they have driven into a choky London den, where he will pine, like a lark in a cage.’

‘Walter had made his choice on that score before he knew that he was to be rejected,’ observed Mr. Brune; ‘and you must learn to moderate your language, Nell, or people will set you down as a little termagant. I give you over Mrs. Winnington; but you needn’t curse the whole tribe of Stanniforths. There’s Tom, for instance; I call Tom a capital fellow.’

‘Do you?’

‘Yes; don’t you? I thought you and he had struck up a firm alliance when he was here.’

‘Oh!’ said Nellie, ‘I liked him well enough in a sort of way; but I have no doubt that, below the surface, he is just like the others. And then he is such a bore with his philanthropic schemes.’

‘H’m! I may be very wrong; but I was under the impression that it was you who persuaded me, against my better judgment, to sign a petition for the total abolition of vivisection.’

‘Well, I know I did. When people have hobbies, the only way to save oneself from being tormented is to give in to them ; and I told you at the time that it didn’t the least signify, because nobody would think of looking at all those signatures.’

‘Yes, I remember that you made use of that remarkable argument. Poor Stanniforth ! he won’t worry you with any more hobbies ; for I don’t suppose we are likely to come across him again, unless, indeed, he pays them another visit at Longbourne. Do you know, I have sometimes thought that our worthy friend Mrs. Winnington would not be altogether displeased if he were to take a fancy to Edith.’

Nellie burst out laughing with much apparent heartiness. ‘You dear, simple old father ! Do you mean to say that you have only just found that out ? Didn’t you guess why Mrs. Winnington was so desperately anxious to keep things quiet that she didn’t even forbid Walter the house, and has had us twice asked to dinner since Mr. Stanniforth has been there ? I was so glad that we could not go ! I don’t think I could have borne to walk in the old wretch’s triumphal procession, like the captives of the Roman generals. Why, Edith is either engaged to Mr. Stanniforth now, or will be in a few days.’

This conversation took place towards the end of September, at which time Mr. Stanniforth certainly had not compromised his future in the manner imputed to him. He had spent a week at Longbourne, and had then left with a precipitancy which did not lack significance. But of Mr. Stanniforth and his deeds and fortunes, Nellie had neither seen nor heard anything from the day on which he had quitted Broom Leas. During the last few days of his stay she had been pleased, as we have seen, to treat him with a haughtiness, not to say incivility, for which her conscience now began to call her to account. Looking back upon this dispassionately, it did seem somewhat unjust, and perhaps even unworthy, to have vented her temper upon the poor man because Mrs. Winnington had suggested impertinent possibilities with reference to him ; but Miss Brune was not more prone than are the majority of her age and sex to look at things dispassionately, nor had she anticipated that her guest would take this snubbing in the manner that he had done. If it had been in her power to look down into the depths of her heart, she would have made a discovery which would have surprised her ; for she would have found out that what she wanted was that Mr. Stanniforth should inquire into the cause of her changed demeanour, and, without receiving any answer—

for of course he could not receive any—should by some means or other have arrived at a comprehension of it. But he had done nothing of that kind. He had asked no questions, nor had he once taken the trouble to call at Broom Leas after his change of quarters. He had simply (so it seemed to Nellie) shrugged his shoulders, and walked off, as a sensible man might be expected to do when out of patience with the caprices of a silly schoolgirl. Now it was by no means in this latter light that Miss Brune desired to be regarded by Mr. Stanniforth or anybody else: hence, possibly, the acrimony with which she had spoken of him behind his back.

During the succeeding six weeks Nellie had leisure enough and to spare for the duty of self-examination; but as this method of passing time is seldom satisfactory to young and healthy minds, she soon discarded it, and began to cast about her for occupation or amusement in one form or another. Of these two good things there was now, as it happened, an unwonted dearth in her small world. Out of all her tribe of brothers not one was at this time beneath the paternal roof, some being at school, some at sea; even Walter was away in London, where Philip also was hard at work, studying law after the fashion known to the reader. Mrs. Winnington,

in search of second and third strings to her bow, had carried off Edith into the west of England. The neighbourhood, too, which at the best of times was not a remarkably lively one, had entered upon the annual period of torpor which separated the last of the garden parties from the first of the winter dances.

All this tended to produce a feeling of melancholy which the season of the year was well calculated to deepen. The leaden skies, the bare, brown fields, the yellow leaves that fluttered down in showers with every gust of wind, the chrysanthemums and dahlias all draggled and forlorn—these were dismal objects to contemplate when one had little else to do, the livelong day, but to contemplate them. Every morning the low mists hung over the Cray valley, and every afternoon they crept slowly up to the higher ground, wrapping men and things in a moist and chilly embrace. Mr. Brune caught a bad cold in his head, and became a trifle querulous under the influence of it, declaring that this being out in all weathers would be the death of him, and that he missed Walter more every day.

‘I shouldn’t catch colds in my head if I were not in such confoundedly low spirits,’ he asserted; ‘and I shouldn’t be in low spirits if I had somebody to talk to.’

Upon this Nellie eagerly suggested that she should accompany her father on his daily rounds ; but he negatived the proposition despondently.

‘ You can’t walk,’ he said, ‘ and there’s nothing for you to ride.’

‘ There’s Wasp,’ said she.

Now Wasp was a powerful young horse which Walter had bought, some months before, with the intention of hunting him during the ensuing season. Nellie had been once upon his back ; but he had given her so much trouble on that occasion that she had been forbidden to repeat the experiment.

‘ I won’t have you riding Wasp,’ said Mr. Brune ; ‘ he is too much for you.’

‘ I should like to see the horse that was too much for me ! ’ cried Miss Brune ; and in truth she had a light hand and a firm seat, and had often been complimented upon her possession of these gifts.

‘ Very well, my dear, then you can look at Wasp as often as you please. I can’t afford to have my children breaking their arms and legs in these hard times.’

Nellie said no more ; for she understood how to manage her father. And the remainder of this chapter will be devoted, amongst other things, to showing how wrong it is of children

to manage their parents, and how foolish of parents to let themselves be managed by their children.

On the following morning the wilful young woman whose discomfiture will presently be related, privately ordered a side-saddle to be put upon Wasp ; and when Mr. Brune went into the stable-yard after breakfast to mount his own steady cob, lo and behold ! there was a diminutive person in a riding habit, perched upon a sidling grey quadruped of gigantic size, waiting for him ; and he was immediately greeted with a triumphant

‘ There now ! didn’t I tell you so ? You see he’s as quiet as a lamb.’

Mr. Brune remarked that he was evidently getting into his dotage, and that the sooner he was dead and buried out of sight the better, since nobody any longer dreamt of paying attention to his express orders. He then sarcastically inquired whether a leading-rein had been provided for him ; whereat the stable-helper, who was a young man of no manners or refinement, burst into a prodigious haw-haw, and had to be sternly rebuked by the coachman. Mr. Brune, meanwhile, had climbed a little stiffly into his saddle, and, after a few preliminary plunges on the part of Nellie’s gallant grey, the pair rode off side by side, the old coachman hobbling out to

watch them with a countenance expressive of admiration not unmingled with anxiety.

‘Hope they won’t meet any o’ them blamed traction-engines,’ he muttered. ‘That there Wops he ain’t the oss for a nervous rider, let alone a young lady.’

Wasp was certainly not a pleasant animal to ride. His notion of getting over the ground was a series of senseless and objectless shies ; and his notion of shying was a tremendous spring from one side of the road to the other, followed by sundry snorts and capers, which seemed intended to signify to his rider that nothing except a strong sense of duty restrained him from making a bolt for it. Nellie, however, rather enjoyed, or said that she enjoyed, these light-hearted performances, and would not hear of going back and having the saddles changed, as her father humbly requested her to do. So they pattered about from field to field the whole morning, and had a gallop over a corner of the downs ; after which the exuberance of Wasp’s spirits subsided a little ; insomuch that Mr. Brune was brought to confess that there didn’t appear to be much harm in the brute after all. His confidence was at length so fully restored that, when they reached the bailiff’s cottage, he was persuaded to dismount and look over some accounts which had been prepared for his

perusal, leaving his daughter to wait outside.

Now waiting was what neither Nellie nor Wasp liked ; and at the end of ten minutes one of them reached the limits of her stock of patience. She tapped on the window with her whip, and asked whether she might ride just a little way on the downs to keep herself warm, and come back again. Mr. Brune called out hastily, 'No, no ; stay where you are. I'll be with you directly.' But perhaps his daughter did not hear him ; for she quietly turned her horse's head away, and was soon cantering up the grassy slopes of a hill famed in those parts as offering a point of view whence the usual incredible number of counties can be distinguished on a clear day. She reined up her horse when she reached the crest, from which only one county, and not very much of that, was then visible ; but if there was little in the way of scenery to attract the notice of the solitary horsewoman, she was rewarded, before many minutes were past, by the sight of something that caused her to jump, and cry 'Oh !' in accents of suppressed excitement which no landscape, however extensive, would have drawn from her.

Far away, beyond the misty valley at her feet, a small reddish-brown object suddenly flitted across the opposite hillside, and was gone ; and

almost before the above ejaculation was uttered, there were the hounds, streaming after the fox, and presently a few red coats appeared in the wake of the hounds.

‘Oh,’ exclaimed Nellie, ‘*how* I should like to be with them !’

An instant later she would gladly have recalled a wish which had been only too fully shared by another spectator of the scene. Wasp, whose cocked ears and trembling limbs had escaped the attention of his heedless rider, not only wished, but meant to be with them, and, in order to give the promptest effect to his intentions, he was tearing down the slope at a speed which showed little consideration for his own safety or that of his mistress. Nellie did not like it at all. She might as well have tried to stop an avalanche as to pull up a runaway horse in such a place as that ; but she tugged as hard as she could, just by way of letting him know that she was there, and, finding that her efforts produced no effect whatever, made the best of what could not be helped, sat well back, and wished for the end. Even in that moment of dire distress, she found a grain of comfort in the reflection that she was in no danger of heading the fox. Thundering down a declivity almost as steep as the proverbial side of a house, with the ground flying from under her like running water, an

aspiration flashed across her mind akin to that in which the unfortunate bricklayer is said to have found time to indulge between the top of a Parisian scaffolding and the pavement of the street below—‘*Oh, mon Dieu! pourvu que ça dure!*’ ‘If nothing happens between this and that!’ she thought. By ‘that’ she meant the slope on the further side of the valley, where, supposing that she ever got there, she felt tolerably sure of being able to check her headlong career.

But, alas! Wasp had thought of that too; or, if he had not thought of it, instinct told him to head down the valley, and to round the base of the hill behind which the red coats had vanished. Somehow or other, he and his helpless load reached level ground; somehow or other—Nellie never knew how—they traversed a road, a ditch, and a small brook; and now they were racing across a stretch of open country, and were gaining upon the last of the horsemen. But, owing to some inequalities in the ground, only the heads and shoulders of these were visible, and in a minute or two the tops of their hats had disappeared. It was then that Nellie became aware of a new peril, and a more formidable one than any of those from which she had escaped. Directly before her was a ragged black hedgerow which looked both high and thick; and since nothing but a glimmer of grey

sky could be discerned through it, it seemed evident that there must be a drop of unknown depth on the other side. Nellie took this in at a glance, and at the same moment a sickening suspicion of wire crossed her mind. Although this was her first experience of following the hounds (for Mr. Brune had old-fashioned prejudices with reference to the appearance of ladies in the hunting-field) she had often ridden across country with her brothers, and was not afraid of any obstacle of moderate size ; but she knew that she had never been over such a big thing as this in her life ; and, what was worse, she very much doubted whether Wasp ever had either. The brute was rushing blindly ahead ; she made a despairing and fruitless attempt to steady him ; then she shut her eyes. Immediately came a crash ; a sensation as if the whole world was breaking up into fragments, a brilliant display of fireworks—and the next thing of which Miss Brune was fully conscious was that she was sitting in a ploughed field, with her hair hanging over her face, and the hills and sky revolving in a most extraordinary manner round her.

After wondering for a moment whether she was dead or alive, and satisfying herself that her head was still upon her shoulders, she raised herself on to her knees ; and perhaps some people would have profited by that position to

return thanks for deliverance from sudden death. Nellie, however, must have inherited the instincts of a sportswoman; for the first thing that suggested itself to her mind was not this obvious duty, but the expediency of catching her horse, whom she saw at the other end of the field, trotting round with his head in the air, and in a state of bewilderment evidently quite equal to her own. Some people, again, would have been very willing to let that head-strong beast go his own way, and would not have cared to give him a second chance of breaking a Christian neck; but this was by no means Nellie's view of the case. She knew that Wasp would have had quite enough of running away for one day, and that, if by any means she could contrive to hoist herself upon his back, he would let himself be ridden home as submissively as could be wished.

To catch a loose horse is, however, one of those things which are more easily determined upon than carried into execution, and the difficulty is not lessened when the pursuer happens to be in a somewhat unsteady condition as to head and legs, and to be further encumbered with a torn riding-habit. Nellie plunged across the furrows as best she could, and when she got near her horse, called him by name; whereupon he cocked his ears, neighed, and waited for her

to approach. He then flung up his head, and went off at a gallop. Nellie now proceeded to stalk him patiently and warily into a corner, he lending himself to the design and watching her movements with much apparent interest. When she was within a few yards of him, up went his head again, and away he cantered into another corner, whither she laboriously followed him. This manœuvre was repeated for the space of half an hour; at the end of which time Miss Brune's patience and strength alike gave way, and she felt very much disposed to sit down in the dirt and cry. Wasp, too, had seemingly become tired of the game. There was a gap in the hedge at the further end of the field which a less stupid animal would have taken advantage of long before. He now scrambled through it, and was promptly lost to sight. The thunder of his retreating hoofs was heard for a few minutes; and then there was complete silence and solitude.

‘What *am* I to do!’ exclaimed Nellie, half laughing, half crying. Her hat was a shapeless ruin, her habit was in rags, her face was bleeding from the scratches of the briery hedge, she was covered with mud from head to foot, and she was a good five miles from home. As to what she was to do, that was a question which demanded no long consideration, there being only

one thing to be done ; she must make her way home on foot. But, although Miss Brune soon realised this necessity, she was not at all so sure that her strength was equal to the task that lay before her. She began to feel the effects of her fall in aching limbs and a swimming head, and the exercise which she had taken in the last half-hour had reduced her to something very like complete exhaustion. However, she stumbled out of the ploughed field, crossed a pasture, and ere long struck a faintly-marked track which she knew would lead her across the downs to Broom Leas.

The experienced novel-reader will perceive that the moment has now arrived for the introduction upon the scene of the *deus ex machinâ* ; and sure enough before Nellie had plodded a quarter of a mile between the cart-ruts that marked her path, he duly made his appearance in the form of one whom she had supposed to be many miles away at that time. In her sorry plight, dignity and conventionality were burdens too petty to be remembered : accordingly, when the equestrian who was approaching her at a foot's pace pulled up, and exclaimed, in accents of stupefaction, ' God bless my soul ! is that Miss Brune ? ' she replied with unaffected warmth—

‘ Oh, Mr. Stanniforth, I am so delighted to

see you! I began to think I should have to lie down and die in a ditch.'

Mr. Stanniforth had at once dismounted, and was too busy inquiring into the nature of the accident that had befallen Miss Brune to give any explanation of his own presence. It was not until she had assured him at least a dozen times that she had received no hurt beyond a few scratches, and that all she at present desired was to find some means of reaching home before the spectacle of the riderless grey should have frightened her father out of his senses, that he consented to give an account of himself. He was staying at Longbourne, he said. He had come down quite suddenly, finding that he had a few days at his disposal; he had ridden out after luncheon, in hopes that he might fall in with the hounds, but had failed to do so, and was now very glad indeed that he had failed.

'I suppose Mrs. Winnington and Edith have come back,' observed Nellie, who had now had time to bethink herself of many things which the first sight of a friendly face had driven out of her remembrance, and whose manner had consequently become much more formal.

'No, they haven't,' answered Tom, glancing at her quickly; 'they are—somewhere or other. Margaret told me where it was, but I'm sure I

forget. Why should you suppose they had returned ?'

'Oh, I don't know; I thought perhaps they might,' answered Miss Brune with ostentatious carelessness. 'I wish I could get home somehow; my father will certainly think I am killed. Can't you suggest something?'

'Well—unless you were to ride my horse. But you could hardly do that.'

'No, hardly. There is a farmhouse about a mile further on which I could easily find my way to; and if they only knew at home that I was there, they could send for me. Couldn't you ride on and tell them?'

'Yes, I could do that, of course,' answered Mr. Stanniforth slowly, and with evident reluctance. 'But I don't think you ought to be left alone here.'

'Why not?' inquired Nellie, turning an astonished pair of eyes upon him. 'What harm could possibly happen to me? I should be so very much obliged if you would go on as quickly as you can; it would be so much the best way.'

'If you tell me to go I must go; but I feel sure that your father would much prefer my seeing you into a place of safety. You really are not fit to walk without help, and if you will allow me to give you my arm——'

Nellie said she was perfectly well able to walk by herself, and required both her hands to hold up her habit.

‘And besides,’ continued Tom, ‘my getting to Broom Leas a quarter of an hour sooner or later can make very little difference. Either your horse has gone straight back to his stables, in which case he is there by this time, or he has gone off in the other direction—which from your account seems more likely—and will probably be heard of next in Crayminster. Do let me take you as far as that farm, and I promise you that the moment I have handed you over to the farmer’s wife, I will be off to Broom Leas like the wind.’

Nellie did not give her consent to this arrangement; but, as she did not withhold it either, Mr. Stanniforth let well alone, and said no more. They walked on, side by side, in silence for some little time, and then he took up the conversation at the point where it had been broken off.

‘Did you mean to say just now,’ he asked abruptly, ‘that it must have been in order to see the Winningtons that I had come here?’

‘Really, I had not thought much about the matter. It wouldn’t be very extraordinary if you had come here in order to see them, would it? I thought you liked them so much.’

‘So I do,’ he answered resolutely; ‘I think they are very nice people—especially Miss Winnington. But it wasn’t to see them that I came here, all the same.’

‘Oh!’

‘If you care to know why it was that I came——’

‘Thanks; I don’t care to know at all,’ interrupted Nellie hastily; for in an instant she had guessed what was coming, and she was determined to stop it, if she could. ‘Where have you been since you left these parts?’

Had she known Mr. Stanniforth as well as some of his colleagues in the House of Commons knew him, she would have been aware that to stop that excellent man when once he had made up his mind to deliver himself of a statement was to the full as hopeless a task as to pull up Wasp in mid-career.

‘All right,’ he answered cheerfully; ‘then I’ll tell you, though you don’t care to hear. I should have to tell you sooner or later, and why not now as well as at any other time? I came here because I hoped to see you.’

It was then that the impossibility of assuming a cold and majestic mien with a broken hat cocked rakishly over one eye, and a countenance disfigured by many scratches, made itself painfully manifest to Miss Brune.

‘Well,’ she said, laughing nervously, ‘you have seen me now, and it is to be hoped that you are satisfied. I sincerely trust that no other stranger will see me for at least a week.’

‘But you don’t call me a stranger, do you?’ asked Tom reproachfully. And, getting no answer to this query, he continued, in a low and slightly hoarse voice, ‘Miss Brune, I am generally considered to be a tolerably ready speaker; but there are some things that a man feels too strongly about to be able to express in the best words; and I don’t know how to say what I am going to say to you, though Heaven knows I have thought about it often enough.’ He paused for a moment. ‘There is a great deal that might be said about difference of age and—other things,’ he resumed, ‘but perhaps you will understand, without my mentioning it, that I fully feel the force of all that, and that I am not making use of any conventional form of words when I say that I know myself to be not nearly good enough for you. Only this I can say for myself, that I never loved any woman but you in my life, and never shall. It is rather odd for a man of my age to be able to make such an assertion; but I don’t know, after all, why it should help me much. It all comes to much the same thing in the end. It’s just a case of Yes or No.’

Having put the case in this very explicit manner, Mr. Stanniforth stood still, and paused for a reply.

Now to be driven into a corner is what no woman likes; and Nellie considered that she had especial reason for resenting such treatment.

‘If I had supposed for one moment that you were going to speak in this way,’ she said tremulously, ‘I should not have allowed you to walk with me. I don’t think you ought to— to have taken advantage of——’

‘But is it to be Yes or No?’ persisted this somewhat peremptory wooer, too eager for his answer to notice the appeal made to his generosity. ‘Only tell me that, and I won’t say another word.’

‘Oh, dear,’ exclaimed Nellie, bursting into a rather hysterical laugh, ‘how ridiculous this is! I wonder whether anybody in the world but you would ever have dreamt of choosing such a time as this to—to mention such a subject. I can’t think of anything at all, except of how dreadfully tired I am. Is that the farm over there? Oh, I *hope* it is.’

‘But, Miss Brune—Nellie—won’t you just tell me whether it is to be No.’

‘Very well, then,’ cried Nellie, stamping her foot in exasperation, ‘it is No—of course

it is No! I didn't want to be disagreeable, but you will have it. It is No; I can't say anything more.'

It was true enough that she could not say anything more. The agitations of the day had completely broken down her self-control at last, and, despite all her efforts, the tears had forced their way into her eyes. It was all that she could do to avoid disgracing herself by bursting into audible weeping.

But Tom Stanniforth, who was looking straight before him, did not see these signs of distress. Not another word did he speak until they had reached the farmhouse and he had delivered his charge into the hands of the farmer's wife. But just before he mounted his horse, he held out his hand to Nellie, and said—

'Good-bye, Miss Brune. I shan't bother you by letting you see me again till you have forgotten all this. I am sorry if I caused you any annoyance just now; and I know you are kind-hearted enough to be a little sorry for me too. It was quite true, what I told you about my never caring for anybody else. I hope you'll believe that, and that you'll forgive me if I have seemed a little presumptuous. I had to say it, you know.'

Nellie nodded, being unable to find her

voice; and so he rode off, and was soon out of sight.

Late that evening Mr. Brune, who had scoured the country far and wide in search of his daughter, and had thus been spared the shock of encountering Wasp, who had trotted quietly back to the stables, remarked that Tom Stanniforth really seemed to have behaved with great sense and consideration.

‘I shall always like Tom,’ he said; ‘a true gentleman in every way, whatever you may say about his pedigree. I can’t understand what you find to dislike in him.’

‘I don’t dislike him,’ answered Nellie humbly; ‘I think he is very kind.’

‘But you look down upon him, Lord knows why! One gets odd ideas into one’s head; I suppose it’s a sign of old age creeping on,’ continued Mr. Brune musingly; ‘but I couldn’t help thinking to-day what a capital thing it would have been if you and he had taken to each other, and if he had married you instead of Edith. Don’t make faces, my dear, I am only indulging in speculations; and, dear me! what a speculation that would have been, when you come to think of it! I suppose Tom Stanniforth will be one of the richest men in England; and, upon my word, I believe he will be one of the

best husbands too. I don't grudge Mrs. Win-
nington her luck ; but it must be confessed that
she does have luck.'

Nellie made no answer, except to point out
that it was long past bed-time.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PHILIP GOES INTO SOCIETY.

AT the moment when Mr. Brune was giving way to mercenary aspirations, as recorded above, the subject of his regrets was sitting before a blazing fire in the smoking-room at Longbourne, smoking one of the excellent cigars of which a stock was always to be found in that well-ordered establishment, and enjoying, or appearing to enjoy, the creature comforts incidental to the situation. It was his sister-in-law who had suggested to him that, as they were alone in the house, they should betake themselves to this cosy little apartment immediately after dinner, asserting, as kind-hearted ladies do sometimes (and Heaven only knows whether they are speaking the truth, or whether it is not an act of selfish brutality to take them at their word), that she liked the smell of tobacco, and that to spend the evening in the smoking-room, instead of in the drawing-room, was an unwonted treat to her.

It reminded her, she said, of old days, when she used to sit with Jack after dinner. Perhaps she wanted an excuse for talking about Jack ; and on ordinary occasions Tom, who had had a sincere affection for his younger brother, would have been willing enough to gratify her ; but this evening his thoughts were, not unnaturally, centred upon himself, and with a very little encouragement he would have related the whole history of his disappointed hopes. Thus, these two people, who had become excellent friends, and who were both inclined just now to claim a little of the sympathy to which friendship is entitled, remained for some time at cross purposes, each throwing out hints to which the other failed to respond, until it became evident that some topic of common interest must be resorted to. This was in Tom's favour ; for when the conversation languished, it was inevitable that the adventure of the day should suggest itself as the ground for a fresh start, and so he soon found an opportunity of remarking, in a casual manner, that he supposed so pretty a girl as Miss Brune would not be likely to remain Miss Brune much longer.

‘I don't think she will be in a hurry to marry,’ Margaret said. ‘Nellie has a good deal of character, and she will be sure to think well before she chooses.’

‘If she has not chosen already.’

‘Yes, if she has not chosen already. There are perhaps half a dozen marriageable young men hereabouts, and I believe they are all of them devoted to her in an off-and-on sort of way.’

‘Is there anybody in particular, should you suppose?’ inquired Mr. Stanniforth, staring up at the cornice.

Margaret poked the fire, and made no reply; so he went on, ‘I used to fancy that young Marescalchi was paying her a good deal of attention, but perhaps it didn’t mean anything.’

Margaret laughed; whereupon her interrogator withdrew his eyes from the ceiling with great promptitude, glanced inquiringly at her, saw it all, and immediately dropped into a gloomy reverie.

‘I am glad you noticed that,’ said the unconscious Margaret, ‘for I have always thought that those two were exactly suited to one another, and hoped that something might come of it some day. But I have given up match-making,’ she added with a shake of her head. ‘I have made one or two attempts in that way, and the results have not been encouraging. I suppose people must be allowed to choose for themselves.’

But Mr. Stanniforth was no longer anxious

to pursue the subject, and indeed had not distinctly heard the last few words. 'Oh, yes, certainly, I quite agree with you,' he said; and then began to talk very fast about habitual drunkards, in which unfortunate class of society he had been lately stirred up to take a keen interest. He had a comprehensive scheme for dealing with them in their double character of afflicted fellow-creatures and responsible members of the community; but as the carrying out of this project would have involved the expenditure of some millions of the public money, besides interfering with the liberty of the subject after a fashion conceivable only to enlightened Radical brains, the reader need not be wearied with its provisions. Margaret listened to them patiently, argued against them, was triumphantly silenced, and ultimately went to bed with a consolatory assurance that she had done what was expected of her.

At breakfast the next morning, Mr. Stanniforth, who had passed a bad night, looked up from a pile of opened letters that lay before him, and said that he was very sorry, but he was afraid he must be off. He had spent the first half of the recess in unwonted idleness, and would now have to work hard to make up time. The habitual drunkards, it appeared, were clamouring for attention; the anti-vivisectionists

were about to hold meetings in various places at which the presence of the member for Blackport would be indispensable ; the insufficiency of railway servants, and consequent alarming increase of accidents, was likewise a subject that seemed to require looking into ; so that, upon the whole, it came to this, that he would have to leave by the twelve o'clock train.

Margaret expressed her surprise and regret at this sudden change of plans, but was hardly so much afflicted by it as she might have been, had not the post brought her her own share of disquieting correspondence in the shape of an announcement from Philip that he had finally made up his mind to abandon the law in favour of the operatic stage.

‘I have been thinking about this for a long time,’ he wrote, ‘but I would not tell you until I was tolerably sure of success, because I wanted to spare you needless worry, and I knew you would be rather horrified at first. Don’t breathe a word about it to anybody just yet—it would only set the whole pack of them baying at you if you did—but think it over quietly, and I am sure you’ll agree that I might do worse. Old Steinberger (perhaps you have never heard of him, but he is a celebrity nevertheless)—Steinberger says my high notes only want practice to be as good as Wachtel’s (I daresay you have

never heard of Wachtel either) ; and, if all goes well, I ought, in a few years' time, to jump to the top of the tree at one bound. Is there any other profession in the world in which such a *coup* as that would be at all possible ? As for the social position, anybody will tell you that great singers are received everywhere in these days ; and between ourselves, my dear old Meg, who am I to give myself airs ? The nuisance of it is that living in London, and having the best masters, and all that, costs a lot of money ; but I must economise, and I daresay I shall manage to get on somehow. The rapidity with which a five-pound note melts away here is awful. Cab-hire alone '—&c., &c.

The remainder of the letter contained a good many hints of this delicate nature, for Philip seldom asked directly for money, that being a course of procedure which went against his finer feelings.

Money, however, was what he was at this time in urgent need of ; and, but for this circumstance, it is probable that Margaret would have been allowed to remain for some time longer in ignorance of his schemes. One reason in particular he had for desiring that his coffers should be replenished : namely, that he contemplated a change of domicile. The remote situation of Coomassie Villa—half a day's journey

from the Club, as he would often pathetically remark—was causing him daily inconvenience, and he no longer dreaded the risk attaching to residence in a more frequented quarter ; for he was beginning to feel convinced of the truth of the common saying that one is never so much alone as in a crowd. It was, however, quite certain that the suburban butcher, baker, and grocer would not suffer him to depart until their several little accounts had been defrayed ; and therefore it was that he awaited Margaret's answer with no small impatience, and that, when the answer came, he was a great deal more anxious to examine the figure of the cheque contained in the envelope than the accompanying eight pages of manuscript. But he did read the latter as soon as he had ascertained the satisfactory nature of the former, and was a good deal touched by Margaret's kindness and generosity.

Nothing, indeed, could have been more moderate than the tone of her reply. She did not deny that Philip's news had startled her, nor that she had certain misgivings as to the social position about which he had expressed himself so confidently ; but she admitted that he was better able to judge of such questions than she could be, and further, that he had a perfect right to choose his calling in life for himself ;

the one essential thing, for him and everybody else, was to have a calling of some kind or other. She then went on to make some very true, if not very original, observations on the solaces of labour, which Philip skimmed over rapidly, and concluded by thanking him for having taken her into his confidence. In a postscript she added that she was sure his expenses must be heavier than he could conveniently manage, and that she therefore enclosed a trifle, which she hoped would help to lighten them for a time.

There was a pleasing provisional sort of sound about the last three words which Philip did not fail to note and appreciate.

‘Fan,’ said he gravely, as he folded up the letter, ‘if the baby should die, and I should be cut off in my prime, immediately after realising a handsome fortune on the boards of the Italian Opera, don’t you take it into your foolish little head to adopt an orphan. Unless he turned out to be very unlike some other orphans whom I have heard tell of, he would be a burden to you all your life, he would take your last penny from you with absolute complacency, and at the bottom of his heart he would think you rather a fool for giving it to him.’

The awful possibilities foreshadowed in this

speech were too much for Mrs. Marescalchi, who began to cry.

‘Now, now, Fan,’ remonstrated Philip, ‘you ought to know me better by this time than to take every word I say so seriously. I’m not really such an ungrateful beggar as I make myself out ; and as for dear old Meg, it’s a positive delight to her to throw her money out of window. If I didn’t pick it up, you may be sure that somebody else would—perhaps a less deserving person.’

‘Oh, but Philip,’ sobbed Fanny, ‘how could you talk like that about—about your dying? And dear baby, too! I can’t bear to hear you say such things.’

‘Oh, is that it?’ said Philip, much amused. ‘I think you may feel reassured, then. In point of physical health I can safely speak of myself in the highest terms, and I don’t see a symptom of anything wrong with baby, unless it’s excess of fat. So dry your eyes, Fan, and I’ll go out and search for lodgings in some more civilised district.’

Of this task Philip discharged himself with due circumspection. It might be permissible to be bold, but it would not do to be too bold ; and therefore he decided to eschew such favourite localities as Clarges Street and the like, where people from Crayminster or the neighbourhood

might at any time establish themselves next door to you for a week or two. The other side of Bond Street was quite as handy and less dangerous ; and chancing upon a tolerably commodious first floor in Conduit Street, which at that season of the year was to be had for a moderate weekly rental, he agreed to take it. Thither, in the course of a few days, he transplanted his belongings, and there for a time he dwelt in prosperity and contentment, no man forbidding him.

When Philip walks down Conduit Street nowadays the smile with which he habitually faces the world and all that therein is fades from his expressive countenance, and as he passes a certain house, and glances up at its first-floor window, he does not fail to pay the tribute of a sigh to the memory of hours gone, never to return. He may have forgotten, as most of us do, when looking back upon the past, many a small rub, anxiety, or annoyance ; but the fact still remains that his life during the first part of that winter season was one that agreed with his tastes to a nicety. The lodgings, though not actually luxurious, were as comfortable as London lodgings ever are ; they were kept by a worthy couple whose hearts were at once conquered by the baby, who were kind to Fanny, and not as inquisitive as the servants at Coomassie Villa

had been ; and if the cooking left something to be desired, this was but a small drawback to Philip, since he was so frequently obliged to dine away from home.

It was not only to the Temple that he went when he thus absented himself, nor was the obligation in question by any means of a stringent nature ; but, as Philip was careful to explain, it was not on that account the less real. It would never do for him to refuse invitations, he said, and to allow people to forget him. Social interest and social influences were of the greatest importance to a man who had to make his own way in the world, and counted for more in the profession that he had chosen than the uninitiated might suppose. He gave instances of artists who had obtained the most lucrative engagements by securing the good word of a certain melomaniac nobleman, and of others who had met with all manner of slights and obstacles simply through having failed to please the same potent individual.

But, indeed, he need not have taken so much pains to excuse himself. Fanny was, in the first place, firmly convinced that her lord and master could do no wrong ; and, in the second, she would have put up with any amount of personal inconvenience rather than have defrauded him of the least of his amusements.

Any one who should have suggested to her that she was a neglected wife would have occasioned her quite as much surprise as anger. For her own part she had never been able to accustom herself to late dinner, and greatly preferred a cup of tea and some hot buttered toast at six o'clock. When the baby had been tucked up for the night, and the nurse, after an hour or so of pleasant gossip over the cradle, had also gone to bed, Mrs. Marescalchi would get out some of the books by means of which she was perfecting her education, draw up her chair to the fire, and prepare for a solitary evening, without the faintest suspicion that she was a person whose lot any one would venture to pity.

Sometimes Philip did not come in until long after midnight; for there were evening parties as well as dinners at which he felt it his duty to be present; but, early or late, he always found his wife sitting up for him on his return—a little pale perhaps, but ever in the best of spirits, and not in the least sleepy, as she unhesitatingly declared, if he remonstrated with her on not having gone to bed. There was a cheerful fire, there were his slippers and his velvet smoking-coat, and his particular arm-chair all ready for him; on the table were the little cut-glass decanters which Fanny had pur-

chased for him out of her own pocket-money, knowing that he liked pretty things, and the seltzer water, and a plate of sandwiches, in case he should feel exhausted after all the labours of the evening.

When Philip had made himself quite comfortable, Fanny would seat herself upon a footstool beside him, with her little flaxen head resting against his knee, and coax him to tell her about all the lords and ladies ; and then he would indemnify himself for many hours of enforced self-restraint by taking off the little peculiarities of those to whose coat-tails and apron-strings he was clinging in the hope of being upheld by them until he should be in a position to dispense with such aid. His keen sense of the ridiculous stood in need of some vent of this kind ; and it was as much to amuse himself that he acted as to amuse Fanny, upon whom some of the finer touches of his mimicry were somewhat thrown away. Yet it is probable that her enjoyment of these midnight performances was greater even than his ; and upon one occasion the old gentleman who lodged on the second floor came down in his dressing-gown to say that, if there was a joke, he should take it as a favour if he might be let into it, so that, since it appeared that he was to be deprived of sleep by the noise of laughter

from below, he might at least have the satisfaction of being able to laugh too.

There was a time, not so very long ago, when London in the winter was a city of the dead, so far as people who wished to be considered fashionable were concerned ; but all that is changed now. Society has greatly enlarged itself ; people whose professions require them to spend the greater part of the year in the metropolis are allowed to call themselves fashionable in spite of that necessity ; other people, who are in the proud position of requiring no profession, occupy their town houses every now and again, and receive their friends there : there is less of a crowd and bustle than in the spring, but there is more sociability ; and a young man who has talents of a certain kind and a sufficiently large acquaintance, need have no fear that his time will hang heavily upon his hands. Philip's talents were of the most popular order, being such as contributed directly to the amusement of his fellow-creatures, and it soon became understood that he was living in London, and that a note addressed to his Club would find him. Hitherto he had been chiefly known as a good-looking young man with a turn for amateur theatricals ; he had now acquired a fresh claim to attention in the possession of a wonderful tenor voice ; and this gift served him as a passport into many

houses which would otherwise have remained closed to him. He accepted all invitations from great and small alike ; and this would doubtless have been good policy upon his part, if he had been pursuing a policy at all ; but the probability is that he was doing nothing of the sort. He was not really ambitious, nor was it in him to look far ahead. He went everywhere, because it amused him to do so, and because he had no particular leaning towards one class of society more than another. He did not inform his friends and patrons that he proposed eventually to appear upon the stage, judging that the time was not yet ripe for that announcement ; but when some of them suggested to him that a voice like his ought to be public property, and that if he decided to make it so, he might almost command his own price for it, he thanked them for their hint, laughed, and said—Well, perhaps that might be worth taking into account. In the meantime he was good-naturedly willing to eat their dinners and amuse their other guests and sing for them as often as they asked him to do so.

Herr Steinberger, whose avocations took him to most of the musical parties and private concerts that were going, did not altogether approve of all this. One evening, after hearing Philip sing a *duo* from the *Traviata* with the famous

Signora Tommasini before some three or four hundred people, he caught his pupil by the elbow, and having led, or rather pushed, him into a corner, began to scold him roundly

‘What do you mean by this?’ said the irascible little man. ‘It is a preach of gontract! Did I not tell you I would not have you sing in public?’

‘Don’t be rude and disagreeable, Steinberger,’ said Philip, who was now on terms of familiarity with his master and was not at all afraid of him; ‘this isn’t singing in public. I am here by invitation, and so, I suppose, are you.’

‘I am noding of the sort,’ returned the other. ‘I am paid; and if I was not paid I would be smoking my pipe at home. Do you think I come out at night to hear you sing *Parigi, O cara*?’

‘Well, well,’ said Philip; ‘I am not paid, at all events, and the question of payment was what our agreement referred to, wasn’t it? I quite understand that you will expect to have a percentage off my earnings, when I make any?’

‘I do not want your money,’ growled the German, reddening; ‘I want that you should be a *gredit* to me. And that you will never be, if you let yourself be flattered by the old Tommasini and spoilt by all these laties, and give up

your work. You work no more as you did ; you are getting lazy and gonseited—you will go to the teffel !’ And he turned on his heel and walked off, fuming.

But when Philip went to take his lesson as usual, the next morning, Steinberger recurred to the subject.

‘ You think you learn to sing that way ? You think, because they all clap last night, that you sing like the Tommasini ? The Tommasini she is olt, she is past her day ; but if she would have let out her voice, she would have lift the roof off that meeserable little room ; while you !—one could not hear you on the stairs. How often must I tell you to open your mouth wide—so !—as if you would *schwallow* the audience ? When will you learn to do like this ? ’

And Steinberger opened his own great jaws to their utmost capacity, struck a terrific din out of the piano with his fat fingers, and attacked the same air that his pupil had warbled so sweetly on the previous night—‘ *Ba-harichi, o-ho ga-ra !* ’

Philip burst into a shout of laughter. ‘ No, no, Steinberger, I shall never be able to sing like that.’

‘ Ah, you may laugh,’ said the other, whose voice in truth was more powerful than melodious ; ‘ but what is your English proverb ?—

“ Let him laugh who wins.” And we have a German proverb too, which says, “ *Zeit ist Geld.*” And you will never win anything at all, my vrient, if you spend your time at evening barties.’

Philip did not allow his peace of mind to be disturbed by any such prognostications as these. He knew that Steinberger was fond of scolding, and would have found something else to grumble at in default of the present pretext. He himself thought he was getting on famously. And then it was such a jolly life ! Nobody bothered him ; nobody asked questions ; nobody wanted to know where he lived, or what he was doing when he was not at the Club or in society. Even Walter, whom he saw occasionally, had not inquired his address. Walter, fortunately, was busy from morning till night, and was quite content to dine with his friend at the Club on Sundays, and refresh himself with a talk about Oxford and cricket. Philip, after having for many years of his life looked up to Walter with reverence and some little awe, now found their respective positions reversed, and was rather disposed to patronise his former protector, who was only a clerk in a bank, entirely ‘ out of it ’ as regarded the gay world, and ridiculously ignorant of London and its ways. Brune would get up and say good-night with a

grave face, when Lord Salford dropped in after dinner and proposed to Philip to adjourn to another Club, where they could play poker. No doubt he was thinking that Sunday evening might be better employed than in this manner, and that Philip could hardly have been worse employed, on any evening of the week, than in staking his slender purse against Lord Salford's inexhaustible one.

The latter young man used sometimes to allude to Fanny in a way which it could not have been very pleasant for her husband to listen to, and once he threw our poor hero into a cold perspiration by suddenly fixing his little red eyes upon him, and saying, 'I believe you know more about her than anybody else, Marescalchi.' But this was probably only a random shot; and as Philip kept his countenance, and declared that he had neither seen nor heard of the girl for more than a year, the subject dropped, and there seemed little fear of his secret being discovered.

The discovery of such secrets as his can, however, only be a question of time; and considering how few precautions Philip had thought it necessary to take, it was rather strange that he should have been able to remain a matter of two months in Conduit Street without any of his friends suspecting him of being a

married man. One old friend found him out at last in the simplest and most natural manner in the world.

Colonel Kenyon, after having been baked and enervated for ten years in the Madras Presidency, had been sent by a considerate country to recruit himself on the heights of Shorncliffe, where the wind is always in the east, except when it blows a strong gale from the south-west, and where the general aspect of things during the winter time is about as cheerful as that of a Central Asian steppe. Pinched and shivering in this high-lying region, and brooding daily over the puzzle of existence and the hardships of a soldier's life, the poor man would have been almost inclined to gratify several promising brother-officers by resigning his commission, had not a letter from Longbourne come from time to time to cheer him up. These communications were at first somewhat stiff and formal ; but as the replies which they elicited were quite as constrained in character, and a great deal more awkward, it was but natural that Margaret should try to make some advance towards the renewal of a friendship so unhappily disturbed, and to show that she, on her side, was ready to forgive and forget. Thus by degrees the tone of this long-sustained correspondence slipped back into its accustomed

groove, and before the year was out, Hugh could look forward to receiving his weekly budget of news just as of old.

It was in the month of January that Margaret for the first time informed him of Philip's change of plans. She had not mentioned it before, she said, because she had not felt quite at liberty to do so ; 'and I should not mention it now,' she added, 'only that I know I am perfectly safe in telling you anything ; and I should so very much like to hear what you think of it all. Do you ever go up to London for a day or two ? If you do, I wish you would try to see Philip one day at the —— Club, and let me know how he is looking, and whether he seems in good spirits about himself. I don't like to bother him with questions ; but I have felt uneasy about him lately. He writes very seldom, and he never came to see me at Christmas, though it had been arranged that he was to come down for a week. I give you full leave to laugh at me ; but I can't help having a feeling that something is wrong,'—&c. &c.

Colonel Kenyon did not laugh. He thought it exceedingly likely that something might be wrong, and for his own part was not particularly anxious to find out what that something might be. It is not pleasant to pry into the private affairs of one's neighbours, nor is it pleasant to

be the bearer of bad news. He did not, however, suffer these considerations to weigh with him, but, like the docile slave that he was, took a return-ticket to London, and presented himself at Philip's Club that same afternoon. Mr. Marescalchi was not there, and the Colonel, having only a few hours to spare, asked for his address. This was readily given to him by the porter, who had not been told to observe any secrecy in the matter; and so it came to pass that Colonel Kenyon reached Conduit Street just in time to see Philip step out of a hired brougham, followed by a young lady, who carried a baby in her arms. The young lady Hugh at once recognised as the same whom he had encountered in Philip's company on a former occasion, and the presence of the baby was a fact the significance of which there was no misinterpreting. The whole truth flashed instantly into the intelligence of the astounded spectator.

'Oh, you unspeakable young ass!' he muttered; 'you have done for yourself now, and no mistake. Mercy upon us! how am I to tell Margaret of this? I won't tell her—I'll be hanged if I will! Let the young beggar do it himself. The question is, shall I go and have it out with him, or shall I wash my hands of the whole business?'

While Hugh was standing doubting on the

pavement, Philip and Fanny had entered the house. Neither of them had noticed, in the gloom of the winter afternoon, the tall figure that had remained motionless within a few yards of them as they hurried in out of the cold. The Colonel took two turns up and down the street, and considered of it. Finally he decided that he would not attempt to see Philip that day. It would hardly be fair, and it would certainly be most embarrassing, to walk straight into the presence of Mrs. Philip ; moreover, a man must have a little time to prepare himself for interviews of this disagreeable kind. No ; he would come up to town another day, and try the Club again ; and in the meantime surely he was not bound to tell Margaret what he had accidentally seen.

Now it so happened that a series of trivial accidents prevented Colonel Kenyon from carrying out his intention as speedily as he could have wished. To begin with, he was short of officers, having good-naturedly allowed too many of them to go away on leave. Then the General commanding the district took it into his head unexpectedly to hold a field-day. Then came three courts-martial within a few days of each other ; and then occurred the vexatious case of Driver Jennings.

Driver Jennings, a mild-mannered man,

having obtained permission to remain at Folkestone till midnight in order to soothe the last moments of an aged relative, returned to camp very drunk, at an advanced hour, and was seized with a notion that it might contribute to the general hilarity if he were to 'set the 'ole blooming place afire.' He accordingly collected many furze-faggots, piled them up as neatly as could have been expected from one in his condition, applied matches and paper to the bottom of the structure, and then proceeded to lie down upon the top of it himself, like an Indian widow. Here he would doubtless have perished miserably, had he not been dragged off by the heels, in a somewhat charred condition, by Colonel Kenyon himself, close to whose door this *auto-da-fé* had been kindled. A very pretty blaze was by this time lighting up the surrounding district ; and although no great damage was done, the whole camp had turned out to extinguish the flames, and Driver Jennings was led away, weeping bitterly, to be locked up. The whole affair gave the good Colonel much annoyance ; for the man had been his own servant, and between Jennings drunk and Jennings sober there was all the difference in the world. Moreover, Mrs. Jennings washed for him, and there were numerous little Jenningses. He therefore felt bound to remain upon the spot, and see what

could be done in a quiet way towards mitigating the punishment due to so heinous an offence ; and so, what with one thing and another, a fortnight slipped away before Colonel Kenyon again inquired for Philip at his Club. Once more he was disappointed of finding the object of his search ; and this time the porter added that he had not seen Mr. Marescalchi for three or four days, and believed he must be out of town.

Hugh sighed, and walked straight off to Conduit Street, inwardly hoping that the porter's conjecture might prove correct. Should it be so, he would have done all that could be required of him, and might write to Margaret explaining that he had failed to discover anything about the young man, good, bad, or indifferent.

However, the fat landlady who opened the door for him said Yes ; Mr. Marescalchi was at home.

' And—er—Mrs. Marescalchi ? ' asked the Colonel hesitatingly.

' Yes, sir ; they're both in. But I don't know as they'd care for to see any one.'

The woman's eyes were red, and her tone was so lugubrious that Hugh naturally asked whether anything was the matter.

' Oh, dear me, yes, sir ; they've had a sad

misfortun', pore things. The dear little baby was took with convulsions day before yesterday, sir, and died in a few hours. Such a fine healthy child too!—but you never can tell how 'twill go with their first teeth; and 'tis the will of Heaven, which we must all submit to.'

'God bless my soul! I am very sorry to hear this,' said the tender-hearted Hugh, much concerned. 'It must be a terrible blow to—to the poor mother.'

He had had time to reflect, rather unjustly, that the calamity was not one which would be likely to afflict Philip very much.

'Ah, you may say that, sir. And to Mr. Marescalchi too, pore gentleman!—he do take on terrible about it. Should I just mention as you was here, sir? It might cheer him up like to see a friend.'

'No thank you—no,' answered Hugh hurriedly. 'Under the circumstances it would be better not. No, I won't leave a card; I—it's of no consequence. Call again, you know,' and he retreated hastily, leaving the landlady with a strong suspicion in her mind that the milingtary-looking gentleman was a dun in disguise.

It being now beyond a doubt that Philip Marescalchi was married, was it Colonel Kenyon's duty to write and inform Margaret

of the fact? Readers may judge for themselves upon the point, which is one that seems to admit of a diversity of opinion. Hugh considered it carefully during a whole night and day, and then arrived at the conclusion that he might hold his peace. Rightly or wrongly, he had a very strong feeling that there was something underhand in surprising another man's secrets; and he could not help hoping that, with a little judicious pressure, Philip might be induced to tell his own tale—which would be so much the better solution of the difficulty.

It was with this end in view that he penned a laboriously ambiguous missive, in which he told Margaret that he had not managed to see Philip, but that, from certain rumours which had come to his ears, he was inclined to think that there was ground for her misgivings, and that something had gone wrong. But she must not alarm herself, he added, nor imagine that things were worse than they were. It was quite possible that he might have formed a mistaken notion; and, in short, the best thing she could do was to write to the young man himself, and urge him to make a clean breast of it.

The perversity of women is at the root of nine-tenths of the worries which make this world such an uncomfortable place to live in. When Margaret read Hugh's well-meant letter,

she said to herself that people had no business to make accusations, unless they were prepared to substantiate them ; that she was not going to force herself upon Philip's confidence ; that Hugh was a great deal too ready to suspect evil, and that she was sorry she had ever written to him about the matter. And for some time after this there was a marked coolness in the letters that were addressed to our patient Colonel at Shorncliffe.

CHAPTER XIX.

SIGNORA TOMMASINI.

THE old gentleman who lodged on the second floor in Conduit Street might go to bed as early as he pleased now, without any fear of his rest being disturbed by noise of laughter from below. Those merry evenings were gone and done with: they were as dead as the poor little dead baby who lay six feet deep in Kensal Green—as dead as the last century—as dead as yesterday. Life is nothing else than perpetual death and birth, gain and loss; ‘that which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been.’ Mirth and sorrow come and go, and are forgotten; and perhaps, if we would admit it, grief is the shortest-lived of all our passions.

But that is what no one can bear to acknowledge; and Philip and his wife were firmly persuaded that they would never be merry together any more in the old fashion, never any more be tickled by the old jokes (which, to be sure, had not been intrinsically excellent), never

recover the happiness, the thoughtlessness, the childishness which had been so suddenly swept out of their lives. And it so chanced that they were right ; though the causes of the present and future change were not what they supposed or could foresee. If the second-floor lodger had listened attentively in the silence of the night, his ear might have caught a faint echo of other and sadder sounds, arising from his neighbours' drawing-room, than those to which he had become accustomed. The landlady, who was not exempt from the failings of landladies in general, and saw no great sin in standing rather close to a shut door, told her husband that she could hear 'them pore Marescalchis crying and sobbing, night after night, as if their pore hearts 'd break,' and added that it broke her own heart to listen to them. Her heart, however, continued to perform its functions much as usual ; as did that of one, at least, of the mourners, who stopped crying at the end of ten days or so. A man can't go on weeping for ever ; and perhaps there are not a great many men in the world who would weep over a dead baby even for so long a time as ten days. Philip's temperament being what it was, sorrow was an emotion in which he could indulge just so long as there was something pleasurable in it, and no longer. When it grew painful, weary, monotonous, he began to seek

for relief from it just as naturally as he would have looked about him for sticking-plaister if he had cut his finger. He picked up the thread of his daily life again where he had let it fall ; and surely no reasonable person can blame him for doing what all reasonable persons urge their friends to do under such circumstances.

But poor Fanny was by no means reasonable at this time. Had she been in her ordinary condition of mind and body, she would have been the first to acknowledge that her husband's loss was not, and could not be, as great as hers; but she was out of health, her spirits were broken and her nerves shattered ; and so it came to pass that community of misfortune, which often reunites estranged couples, had the melancholy effect of creating a breach between this husband and wife, who had hitherto been the best of friends. The original fault, it must be acknowledged, lay with Fanny. She made it a great grievance that Philip declined to wear mourning ; although he pointed out to her how hazardous it would be for him to appear in black without any ostensible reason for so doing. He ought not to have minded running that risk, she thought. She, who would have taken it as a matter of course if her husband had considered it prudent to pass her without recognition in the street ; she who had already, by

reason of her ambiguous position, been forced to bear a hundred petty indignities which she never spoke of, could not forgive this imaginary slight to the memory of her dead child. In the same way, she did not complain, either in word or in thought, of being left alone all day ; but it did seem to her a terrible and unnatural thing that her husband should be able to go to the Club, to resume his singing lessons, and to show himself at dinners and concerts just as usual. Philip, in short, ceased to be infallible in her eyes ; and that was a pity for both their sakes.

If there was one thing that Mr. Marescalchi hated more than another, it was settled gloom. A violent outburst of grief he could understand and participate in ; but a phase of affliction which expressed itself in gazing blankly for a whole afternoon at a baby's frock or a pair of tiny shoes was altogether beyond the range of his sympathies. It was by virtue of her constant cheerfulness that Fanny had maintained her hold upon him so long as she had done. Now that she was no longer cheerful, no longer cared to hear about the outer world, no longer laughed with him, and often forgot to flatter him, she became simply a dull and rather vulgar little woman, whose good looks were fading away daily, and who had absolutely no intellectual charms to supply their place. He did

not actually say this to himself; but he felt it; and he felt, too, as he had never done before, what a terrible mistake he had made in marrying beneath him. He shuddered when he thought of the future which he had laid up for himself; for, careless as he was, he did sometimes think of this now. He could not help wondering how it would have been if he had done as he believed he might have done, and engaged himself to Nellie Brune. Margaret had been writing to him a good deal about her lately, mentioning with transparent artfulness that the girl seemed depressed and unlike herself. The inference was obvious, and it was not displeasing to Philip. Depressed?—well, no doubt she might be a little depressed; but it would be in a modified and interesting fashion, he thought. Nellie was not the girl to mope, like some others whom he knew of. Wasn't it essentially plebeian to mope? Well-bred people control their emotions, keep their troubles under lock and key, and do not obtrude them upon the world, which naturally cares not a straw whether they have troubles or not; and Nellie was unquestionably well-bred. He had certainly been very much in love with her at one time; perhaps he had never really been in love with any one else. Now that he came to think of it, he was almost sure that he never had been.

Supposing—there was no harm in supposing impossibilities—that he had been engaged to her now, how different everything would have been! What an interest she would have taken in his prospects! how she would have stirred him up to work! No one knew so well as Nellie did the way to apply that gentle goad of which his languid energies stood in need. And then, when the victory was won, and money was pouring in by the sackful on the gifted *primo tenore*, what a wife she would have made!—a wife of whom any man might be proud. ‘Whoever Nellie’s future husband may be, he’ll be a deuced lucky chap, and I congratulate him in advance,’ says Philip to himself with much magnanimity.

He used to turn these things over in his mind as he sat by the domestic hearth, with Fanny staring at the baby’s shoes opposite to him. When he was away from home he had other things to think about, and probably forgot that there were such persons as Mrs. Marescalchi and Miss Brune in existence. This outer life of his continued to be a gay one; though it also had its own troubles. The result of high play with Lord Salford and other young men of his calibre was what it generally is when earthen vessels essay to whirl down stream in company with brazen ones. Philip was not particularly

unlucky; but when he won he spent his winnings, and when he lost there was apt to be a little difficulty about paying. He was not, of course, called upon to hand over the amount due in any hurry; but Lord Salford, who always paid punctually himself, was not so pleasant as he might have been to those who remained in his debt, and was given to reminding them of how matters stood in a business-like way which Philip, for one, did not relish. Salford had a habit of pulling out a note-book, every evening, as he sat down to the card-table, and beginning with: 'Now let's see, you haven't paid me for three weeks. I make out that I'm so and so to the good. Just look and see if that's right, will you?'

'Oh, it's all right, old fellow; deal away,' Philip would answer hastily; but Lord Salford would not be put off like that.

'Ah, but you look and see if you make it the same as I do,' he would persist. 'I like to start square; because sometimes—don't you know?—fellows will tell you they don't remember things—don't you know?'

Philip used to long to kick Lord Salford when he made insinuations of this kind; but he couldn't afford to kick his friend, as perhaps that amiable nobleman was aware; so he had to grin and bear it. Considering how high the

stakes were, he pulled through better than might have been expected. Fortune favoured him sometimes; and Margaret sent him another cheque—that being the most practical answer that she could discover to Colonel Kenyon's warning letter—which tided him over a bad week. And then, from time to time, he was favoured with a loan by a friend of whom a few words must now be said.

Signora Tommasini had been for so many years known to the public under that designation that her friends had long ago given up addressing her as Mrs. Thompson. It must be presumed that there had been a Mr. Thompson once upon a time; but no one had ever seen him or recollected to have heard his widow mention his name; nor perhaps was it generally remembered that she was an Englishwoman by birth; for in her wanderings about the world she had picked up many foreign customs and languages, and was indeed accustomed to say of herself that she was a cosmopolitan. Her great triumphs lay in the past; though she had not yet ceased to gather laurels, nor (which may have been a more important matter in her eyes) to receive handsome salaries. She had once had the finest contralto voice, and had been one of the handsomest women in Europe; and, though so much as this could no longer be said for her, there were

people who still maintained that she was unapproachable in the *Huguenots*, while as for her face, there were no more wrinkles discernible upon it, when seen from beyond the footlights, than there had been twenty years before. The portliness of her person rendered her, it is true, a somewhat incredible Africaine to the artistic eye, but on the other hand she made a very imposing Azucena. In private life she was a most good-natured, lively, and agreeable person, fond of amusement, fond of society, given to a profuse style of living and careless of her money, after the traditional fashion of great singers. Many a struggling colleague had had reason to be grateful for her generosity, and no one had ever accused her of jealousy of her younger rivals, towards whom she was accustomed to bear herself with a great deal of kindly sympathy. It would hardly, however, have been in human nature that she should take quite so hearty an interest in the rising young women as in the rising young men, and it was as a member of the latter class that she had first noticed Philip and sought his acquaintance. The acquaintance, once made, ripened quickly into a warm friendship; insomuch that Philip, who loved feminine admiration more than anything in the world, had been encouraged to let Signora Tommasini into the great secret that he was studying for

the stage. After this he had proceeded, as time went on, to tell her of other things—of everything, indeed, that there was to tell about himself, barring the trifling circumstance of his marriage—and had found her an exceedingly cheery and comforting confidante.

‘She is in love with you, that fat woman,’ Herr Steinberger would growl scornfully. ‘One of these fine days she will marry you; and then you will work no more. No! you will live upon her money for a few years, and then her voice will go, and then you will both of you *starf* in a garret. Or perhaps she will grind an organ in the streets, and you will dance, instead of the monkey—ho! ho!’

There was a Teutonic heaviness about Steinberger’s pleasantries which might have irritated some people; but Philip took them very good-humouredly. He rather prided himself upon being able to stand chaff; and, for that matter, Herr Steinberger was not the only one who rallied him upon the stout Signora’s evident partiality, and predicted that she would either lead him to the altar or bring an action for breach of promise against him before all was over. He himself partly believed that she had a weakness for his handsome person, and used sometimes to laugh with Fanny over the extravagant compliments which she was in the

habit of paying him, and which he rather unkindly repeated. After the baby's death, when things were so sad and dreary at home, he had solaced himself with a good deal of the Signora's society, and had even been led, as we have seen, to give her so true a token of friendship as to dip into her purse upon occasion.

Signora Tommasini was at this time fulfilling an engagement at Her Majesty's Theatre, where a winter opera-season was going on, and was living in a gorgeous suite of apartments on the first floor of a fashionable hotel. In these Philip spent much of his spare time, being sometimes alone with their occupant, who had graciously given him to understand that he was at liberty to knock at her door at any hour of the day, and sometimes one among a crowd of free-and-easy visitors. Philip availed himself liberally of the permission accorded to him; for the Bohemian company which he encountered in this way diverted him immensely, and he had a sincere liking for his open-handed and impulsive hostess. In his heart he thought her rather an old fool; but then he thought that of so many people whom he liked.

One evening towards the end of January Philip, having, for a wonder, no engagement, went to the Opera to see Signora Tommasini in the *Favorita*. He made his entrance between

the first and second acts, and recognised many acquaintances in different parts of the house, though none happened to be seated within speaking distance of his stall. This he was not sorry for ; for he was in a melancholy vein and did not feel disposed for social intercourse. He sat down, and began wondering what would become of him if a run of ill-luck which had pursued him for more than a week should continue much longer. He already owed a large sum to Lord Salford—a sum so large that it made him sick to think of it, and that he was almost inclined to resolve upon abandoning play altogether, when once he should have pulled back his losses. Unfortunately, this process of ‘ pulling back ’ was sure to be a slow and precarious one, and it might at any time be checked if Lord Salford should suddenly discover—as he was by no means unlikely to do—that he had had enough of London, and was going in for hunting by way of a change. That, Philip was very much afraid, would mean settling, or at all events a confession of inability to settle. Contemplated from any point of view, the outlook was not a cheerful one, and he was growing very mournful over it when the sound of his own name, pronounced close to his ear, recalled him to the present.

‘ Marescalchi—Philip Marescalchi, the man

who acts, don't you know? They say he's going to marry the old girl.'

'Marry the Tommasini! Well, there's no accounting for tastes.'

'My good fellow, it ain't a question of taste. It's neck or nothing with him.'

'Oh, I see—wants the coin, eh? Who is Marescalchi, by the way? Know him at all?'

Philip glanced over his shoulder, and saw in the row of stalls behind him two specimens of the modern type of juvenile precocity whose smooth, vacuous moon-faces, surmounting very stiff collars, were entirely unknown to him. He was rather amused, therefore, when the first speaker answered calmly :—

'Know him? oh, yes, I know him. He's the sort of man who goes everywhere now. His father was—let me see; what was his father? Something in the City, I think. Left him thirty thousand pounds, which he made precious short work of. Hasn't a penny now.'

'What's he living on, then?'

'Oh, if you come to that, what are half the fellows one knows living on? He does a little bit of Mister Jew, I expect; but that sort of game can't be carried on long when you're nobody's heir, you know. Owes a good lot too, I believe, here and there. Salford has cleaned him out of something like ten thousand, and

can't get him to pay up. I suppose Marescalchi thinks it's about time for him to marry his grandmother—no fool either!'

'Well, I can't understand a fellow selling himself like that,' says the second youth, who was perhaps a little less sophisticated than his companion.

'Oh, it don't do to be too particular. Tommy isn't half a bad sort, and she was a deuced good-looking woman in her time,' replies the other man of the world, who could hardly have been out of the nursery at the epoch alluded to. 'Got any amount of the needful, too. Careful old soul, old Tommy; been saving up these twenty years,' he continues. 'Gad! I'd marry her myself if she'd ask me.'

The rising of the curtain put an end to this dialogue, the greater part of which had caused Philip more amusement than annoyance. He had no objection to the innocent gossip of these young gentlemen; only that allusion to his losses at play had not been agreeable to him. 'What a cad Salford is!' he thought angrily. 'If only I can get it back to even money, I'll never sit down to a card-table with him again as long as I live.'

But it was principally in order to banish Lord Salford and cards from his recollection that Philip had betaken himself to the theatre;

and feats of that kind were generally well within his capacity. This evening he achieved his object with the greater ease because he had a genuine appreciation of musical talent, and because Signora Tommasini happened to be singing her very best. Her rendering of *O mio Fernando* was worthy of her most palmy days, and by no one in the audience was she applauded more rapturously than by her young friend in the stalls, upon whom she had already contrived to bestow a gracious smile of recognition. The English public, which likes artists of well-established renown, and is kinder to favourites who have grown old in its service than any other public in the world, never failed to accord a warm welcome to Signora Tommasini; and she was greeted with prolonged clapping from all parts of the house when she came before the curtain, at the end of the act, to bow her acknowledgments.

A lady to whose box Philip paid a passing visit handed him her bouquet, and begged him to throw it to 'that dear Tommasini;' adding, with a meaning smile, 'She will value it the more coming from your hand.'

'What, you too!' cried Philip. 'I have just overheard an individual who says he knows me intimately—though I never to my knowledge set eyes on him before—telling his brother-

booby that I am about to espouse my dear old fat friend ; and now you are going to put me to open ridicule by making me cast these flowers at her feet in the presence of a whole theatre-full of people.'

'I won't ask you to go through such an ordeal as that,' said the lady, laughing. 'Give me them back.'

'Oh, *I* don't mind,' answered Philip ; 'I'm not shy.' And accordingly he did throw the bouquet at the end of the final duet.

It was quite true that he was not shy ; yet he might perhaps have stayed his hand if he had anticipated the little scene that was to follow. He had intended that his bouquet should be launched just before the fall of the curtain ; but in this he had calculated without the audience, which loudly demanded an encore ; and when the Signora advanced, all smiles, to gratify this legitimate wish, what must she needs do but select Philip's flowers from among a host of others, and press them against that part of her ample bodice beneath which her heart might be supposed to be fluttering, while she threw a killing glance at the donor. The poor lady probably meant no harm by this gesture, which she must have indulged in many hundreds of times before ; but under all the circumstances it was a trifle embarrassing.

Philip was aware that during the succeeding few minutes he was being gazed at by a great number of inquisitive eyes, and he was not sorry when it was all over. He had, however, the gratification of turning round and facing the well-informed youth behind him, who had by this time evidently discovered the identity of his neighbour, and who looked exceedingly hot and uncomfortable.

Philip sauntered out, whistling *O mio Fernando* softly, and presently went behind the scenes to congratulate Signora Tommasini on her triumph. After a time she came out of her dressing-room, and gave a cry of satisfaction on recognising him.

‘Ah ! this is lucky,’ she exclaimed ; ‘you are just the person whom I wanted to meet. Let me drive you home, and we can talk as we go. I saw Lord —— to-day, and he was asking about you, and said he wished to make your acquaintance. You know he is a man who can do a great deal for people whom he fancies. He seemed to have an idea that you thought of the stage ; I didn’t tell him ; but he said he had heard a rumour of it. He asked why you did not go to Italy. Why don’t you go to Italy ? I shall be singing at Naples and Florence in the spring ; and if you were there at the same time I could introduce you to all the musical

people, and to your native country into the bargain. You ought to see Florence in May ; there is no city like it in the world. Were you pleased with me to-night ? I suppose you were, or you would not have thrown me those beautiful flowers. I have brought them away with me, you see.'

Signora Tommasini's idea of conversation was of rather a one-sided kind. Her ideas moved even more quickly than her tongue, and she was for ever pouring out a stream of queries, without ever expecting any answer, or listening to it if she obtained one. However, just as she was stepping into her brougham, she put one question which demanded a prompt and definite reply.

'By-the-bye,' said she, suddenly, 'where do you live ? You have never mentioned your address to me.'

'And don't mean to mention it now,' thought Philip. He said aloud, 'Oh, I'm not going home yet. You might set me down at the Club, if it wouldn't be taking you too much out of your way.'

'How mysterious you are !' cried the Signora, reproachfully, as they drove off ; 'you never tell me anything.'

'Never tell you anything ! Haven't I laid bare the innermost secrets of my soul to you ?

Haven't I confessed to you what I have never breathed a word of to anyone else—about my losses at cards, I mean ?'

'Ah, those cards!' sighed the Signora, falling into the trap, and forgetting all about her immediate subject of complaint; 'how I wish I could induce you to give them up! You are going to your Club to play now, I suppose.'

'Only for half an hour or so before I go to bed. According to all the rules of chance, my luck ought to be on the turn now, and I can't afford to lose time.'

'I wish you would amuse yourself in some other way; I wish you would not play with Lord Salford. He is not a nice young man, that. I hear more than you might suppose, and I hear that he says unpleasant things about you.'

'I know he does, confound him!' cried Philip; 'but what can I do? It's a case of pay or play; and as I can't pay, why——'

'You think you must keep on playing—I know! And when you have won your money back, if you ever do, he will want his revenge; and so it will go on until one of you is ruined. And it is not very difficult to guess which one that is likely to be. I am an impertinent old woman, am I not?'

‘You are not in the least impertinent, and you are certainly not old,’ said Philip.

Don’t talk nonsense,’ returned the Signora, not ill-pleased. ‘Anybody can see that I am old and fat; but I am glad you don’t think me impertinent. I want to be your friend——’

‘You have shown yourself to be so,’ put in Philip.

‘And friends must be allowed to claim some privileges. Now, will you make me a promise?’

‘A hundred, if you like.’

‘One will be enough for the present; only you must not break it. Will you promise that, if you should find yourself in sudden need of a sum of ready money, you will come to me? I am one of those people who always have lots of ready money—more than they know what to do with.’

‘My dear Signora Tommasini——’

‘My dear Mr. Marescalchi, if we are to be friends, one of us may very well accept a loan of a few hundred pounds from the other. You will owe the money to me, instead of to Lord Salford, that is all. You will pay me as soon as you would have paid him; and in the meantime I shall not go about London telling everybody that you are in my debt. Here is

your Club. Good night; and don't forget our bargain.'

And the Signora, who had a powerful arm, pushed Philip out on to the pavement, and slammed the door of the brougham before he could utter a word of answer or protest.

He mounted the steps, half touched, half amused, saying to himself that women were strange creatures, and entered the Club, where he found Salford and some others, as he had expected to do. They sat down to play at once; and if Philip, with whom things went extraordinarily well, had gone home at the end of the first hour, he would have wiped off nearly the half of his debt. But he was unwilling to desert his luck, and stayed on for another hour, thereby losing all that he had gained. This would not do at all; so he remained yet another hour, and finally rose up the winner of a small sum.

'I hope, after this, you won't go on howling about your bad luck, Marescalchi,' growled Lord Salford, as they parted at the corner of St. James's Street. 'Never saw a fellow hold such cards in my life!'

'Good night,' answered Philip, curtly, too sick at heart and disgusted with the whole business to resent the very unfounded accusation brought against him.

He hurried home, and, letting himself in with his latch-key, stole upstairs, oppressed by that guilty sensation which even the least hen-pecked of husbands must experience in coming in between three and four o'clock in the morning. A thread of light proceeding from beneath the drawing-room door did not serve to diminish this feeling of compunction. He turned the handle softly, and peeped in. Fanny was lying in her armchair beside the empty fireplace, fast asleep. Her head had fallen back a little, and Philip could not help noticing how sharp the outline of her chin, which had once been so prettily rounded, had become. There were lines, too, about the corners of her mouth, and she moved uneasily in her sleep, uttering, every now and then, a low moan which went straight to the listener's heart. He drew nearer, and stood looking down upon her. One of her hands was hanging down by her side; the book which it had held had fallen from it on to the floor. It was not Lindley Murray nor the 'History of England,' as of yore; it was a child's picture-book, which Philip remembered to have bought, some weeks before, in the Burlington Arcade. He picked it up, and put it on the table beside a small heap of broken toys, a photograph, and a curl of fluffy golden hair that were lying there;

then he laid his hand gently on the sleeper's shoulder.

She woke with a violent start and, knitting her brows, looked about her for a moment in a scared puzzled way. 'Oh, Philip, is that you?' she said at last. 'You were so long in coming, and I fell asleep; and now the fire has gone out, and you will be cold. I am so sorry!'

Then she caught sight of the little collection of treasures on the table, and swept them hastily into her work-basket. It was an unlucky movement. Philip, who, a minute before, would have been ready to drop on his knees before this poor little neglected wife of his and implore her forgiveness, understood the meaning of it—the withdrawal of confidence and tacit reproach that it implied—and was offended.

'I am not cold,' he answered; 'but you are, and no wonder! You really must give up this ridiculous habit of sitting up till I come in. It is not often that I am so late as this; but it would be impossible for me to promise to be at home at any given hour; and I can't have you making yourself ill by doing without your proper amount of sleep. Don't do it again, there's a good girl.'

'Very well, Philip,' answered Fanny, meekly.

'And look here, Fan,' continued Philip,

feeling that he was behaving rather badly, and therefore the more out of humour, 'I do think you might try to stop grieving over what can't be helped. If you mourn from now to the last day of your life, you won't bring the poor little man back: and what good does it do you to make others uncomfortable and wretched?'

Fanny shook her head, and made no answer. The tears were running down her cheeks; but she had turned her back to Philip, and was staring at the black cinders in the grate; so he did not see this, and thought her obstinate.

'Oh, I'm awfully hard-hearted, of course,' he cried, impatiently. 'I ought not to leave you alone all night and all day; but I can't help it. My good girl, don't you see that you simply drive me away? I should go mad if I were to sit here by the hour together without daring to open my lips.'

Fanny burst suddenly into loud weeping. 'Oh, I wish I was dead, too!' she exclaimed. 'I wish I was!—I wish I was! You don't care for me any more—I have known it for a long time, and I don't blame you—what is there to care for in me? Only I wish I could go to baby. I feel as if he *must* want me; and nobody wants me here. Perhaps, if I prayed very hard to die, God would let me go.'

'Hush, hush, my dear!' said Philip, passing

his arm round her waist and drawing her head down on to his shoulder; 'you mustn't talk like that, and you must never say again that I don't care for you; because it isn't true. I spoke crossly to you just now, and I am sorry I did; but you don't know how many things I have to worry me. Come, now, don't cry any more, Fan, and let us kiss and be friends.'

Fanny allowed herself to be soothed and comforted, like the child that she was; and Philip went on.

'You are upset and off your balance altogether, you poor little soul. You ought to get away and have a complete change. You would like that, wouldn't you? You would like to get out of this dismal, choking town into the fresh air?'

Fanny drew in her breath. 'Oh, how I should like it! But we can't go, can we, Philip?'

'Why not? I am sick of London myself, and I should ask for nothing better than to shake off the dust from my shoes against it, and depart—at all events, for a time. Signora Tommasini was mentioning Italy to me to-day; do you remember how we used to talk of going to live in Italy? What should you say to Florence, now? Do you think a fine warm sun

and blue skies would bring the roses back into your face?’

A pink flush had already mounted into Fanny’s cheeks, and her eyes had grown brighter. ‘I don’t think I should mind where we went,’ said she; ‘any place would suit me that suited you, dear—any place, except this dreadful London. But Italy!—oh, it would be like Heaven! And perhaps, if we were there—perhaps——’

‘Well?’

‘Perhaps—don’t be angry, Philip,’ murmured Fanny, glancing up into his face as she twisted one of his coat buttons nervously between her thin fingers; ‘but I was thinking that perhaps, if we were there, you wouldn’t have such a great many friends, and then——’

‘And then I shouldn’t always leave you to your own devices, as I have done lately. Ah, Fan, I have been a selfish brute, I’m afraid; but I’m going to turn over a new leaf now, and we’ll forget all our troubles, and go and live in Arcadia—you never heard of Arcadia, did you? Well, my dear, it’s the place where the Dresden china shepherds and shepherdesses live when they’re at home—a delightful country, where it is always spring, and the sheep trot about with broad blue neckties on, and everybody goes to bed at sunset, and love is eternal, and latch-keys

are unknown. You won't discover it in your atlas; but I daresay you and I may manage to find our way there, if we try.'

Philip went on talking this pleasant nonsense until he succeeded in making his wife laugh for the first time since her great sorrow. He was perfectly sincere at the moment, and was greatly enamoured of the notion of escape from all the vexations and vanities of a cold-hearted metropolis; but of course, when he thought it over in the prosaic daylight, he perceived that nothing short of a miracle could render such escape possible. Who was to defray the cost of a journey to Florence? Who was to pay the tradesmen's bills? Above all, who was to pay Lord Salford?

So, although he continued to talk in a vague way about Italy, no preparations for immediate departure were made; but he did so far redeem his promise of turning over a new leaf that for ten successive days he contrived to reach home before midnight, and he was so kind and thoughtful and like his old self that, during those ten days, poor Fanny lived in a fool's paradise. It was a sort of St. Martin's summer; the last gleam of pale sunshine that was to fall upon a life which had hardly had its fair share of brightness.

CHAPTER XX.

FREE.

PHILIP MARESCALCHI, like some other adventurers who have thrown the dice with Fortune for more important stakes, had a vague confidence in his star. He had so often been upon the verge of a catastrophe, and had been preserved just in the nick of time by some lucky accident or other, that he more than half believed that chance must have a favour for him, and that in his case the worst would never really come to the worst. In luck, and out of luck—that was his theory of life; and the one state must in the long run follow the other, just as the red must eventually follow the black at roulette. But now for a long time his star had been under a cloud; one stroke of bad luck had been succeeded by another, and at last the dreaded climax came.

‘Look here, Marescalchi,’ said Lord Salford, meeting him one morning at the Club and taking him aside; ‘this sort of thing’s utter rot. You

haven't paid me for Lord knows how long, and all the time I've got to pay other fellows, don't you see. If you can't settle, say so, and then I shall know where I am.'

'I don't know what you mean,' said Philip; 'of course I shall settle. I haven't got the money in my waistcoat-pocket. One hardly expects to be dunned in this way.'

'I ain't dunning you,' returned the other. 'All I know is that when I lose, I have to pay; and I don't see why other fellows shouldn't do the same. Of course if they *can't* pay, they can't. Only when that's so, I think it ought to be known.'

'All right; you shall have your money in two or three days,' answered Philip, desperately. 'You don't expect me to sit down and write you a cheque straight off the reel, I suppose.'

Lord Salford smiled in a peculiarly exasperating manner, stuck his hands in his pockets, looked up at the ceiling, and whistled a tune. 'Let's see,' he said, presently; 'this is Wednesday. Shall we say Saturday morning?'

Philip nodded, left the Club, and walked straight off to Signora Tommasini's hotel with the resolute step of a man who has made up his mind to have a tooth out, and feels that the sooner the operation is over the better. There were, as he plainly perceived, but two alternatives

open to him : he must apply either to the Signora or to Margaret; and he chose the course which seemed likely to be productive of the least misery to himself.

The Signora was at home and alone ; and in the course of about an hour Philip had made his predicament fully known to her. He did not at once state the object of his visit, nor disclose the whole amount of the sum which he would have to raise by hook or by crook before the Saturday morning, but allowed these details to be drawn from him little by little, bewailing himself bitterly the while, calling himself by many opprobrious epithets, and vowing that he would have nothing to do with Lord Salford for the future. When he had quite done, the Signora, who had listened to some parts of his recital with a rather grave face, thanked him for having fulfilled his part of what she was pleased to call their agreement.

‘I told you I would help you,’ said she, ‘and I will, with all my heart. Only, to be candid, I did not think you would want quite so much at one time. I don’t say that to blame you, or because I shall have any difficulty in providing you with what you require, but because it will be necessary for me to see my stockbroker before I can give it to you.’

Philip groaned dismally.

‘Now, now, now,’ said the Signora, ‘you are not to make a fuss about it. What is money meant for except to be spent? And surely I, who have not a near relation in the world, may invest my money as I think fit. But for all that, I am a woman of business; I know what things are worth, and I mean to have an equivalent for my loan.’

Philip looked interrogatively at her broad, good-tempered face.

‘You say,’ she continued, ‘that you don’t intend to play cards with Lord Salford any more. Now you are in my power, and I shall make you go further than that. You must give up play altogether.’

‘My dear Signora Tommasini, you may impose any conditions you please upon me, except that. If I give up cards, how in the world am I to repay you your loan?’

‘You will repay me, with interest at the rate of five per cent., when you are receiving as large a salary as I am now. I look upon your voice as excellent security; but I am not going to allow you to encumber the property any further. See what a woman of business I am! There is no occasion for you to thank me,’ she added, as Philip began, rather shamefacedly, to stammer out some expressions of gratitude. ‘It is true that I am doing you a small service; but

I am giving myself a great deal of pleasure at the same time.'

This singular woman was radiant. Nothing could be more obvious than that she was about to make a free gift of a sum which very few people in England could part with and not miss; but we mortals are so constituted that even the most clear-sighted of us can easily be brought to shut our eyes to humiliating facts, and it is by no means certain that Philip did not leave the house with an impression that the Signora knew what she was about, and was placing her money, if not advantageously, at least securely.

Two days later he called upon her again, by her request, and found her waiting for him, with a cheque for four figures, duly written out and signed, before her.

'It's all wrong, you know; I have no business to be taking this from you,' said he, at the same time allowing the slip of paper to be thrust into his hand.

'Give it back to me, then,' she answered calmly. 'Perhaps, after all, I should do better to invest it in the Funds.'

'I am quite sure you would,' said Philip, with a long face; and he held out the cheque, which, however, the Signora did not take.

'No,' she said; 'it would not be worth

while to trouble my broker again. As you have got it you may as well keep it.'

'And suppose I were to drop down dead to-morrow?'

'I should still have enough to buy mourning with. And, besides, I hope I should be too sorry for the loss of my friend to think much about the loss of my money.'

Philip sighed deeply, but pocketed the cheque. 'I don't know how or why it is,' he remarked meditatively, 'but women have been awfully good to me all my life. I believe you are superior to us men in every way. You are certainly more generous than we are.'

'And less just,' said the Signora, with a laugh and a shrug of her fat shoulders. 'Bah! we are generous to-day and shabby to-morrow. Take care how you let a woman get you into her power. That is good advice; but it is thrown away upon you, for you will always be in the power of some woman, my friend.'

'You told me the other day that I was in yours,' observed Philip, smiling.

'So you were, for the moment; and did I not take advantage of my opportunity? But I am what they call *bonne diablesse*; I wish you may never fall into worse hands than mine.'

'So do I, with all my heart,' answered he fervently.

Lord Salford, to his evident surprise, was paid in full on the following morning ; and, as Philip descended the steps of the Club, after discharging his debt, he promised himself that he would hardly take the value of his subscription out of that establishment for the future. Henceforth his evenings should be spent at home. From card-playing he was debarred by a promise which he was determined to keep ; and he resolved also to renounce evening parties, or at all events only to attend such of them as it would be really wrong, in view of ultimate professional advancement, to neglect.

‘I see the woods of Arcadia looming in the distance, Fan,’ he said, the same night, to his wife, after dining contentedly with her off burnt mutton chops and rice pudding ; and she smiled faintly, and answered, ‘Do you, dear?’ in that patient, pathetic way which had lately become habitual to her.

Perhaps it was the removal of the pressure of debt from his mind, perhaps it was his increased leisure, that enabled Philip to notice something which he might have noticed long before, and which now began to cause him serious anxiety. Fanny was growing paler and thinner every day ; she had no appetite, slept very little, and, in spite of all efforts to appear cheerful, there was a listlessness in her every

movement which would have told its own tale to a less observant spectator than her husband. He, now that his tardy apprehensions had been roused, was even more alarmed than the occasion seemed to warrant, and would not listen to her assurances that there was nothing the matter with her. He insisted upon calling in the doctor, who, after a somewhat lengthy examination, had no very satisfactory report to give of his patient.

‘There is not any definite disease,’ he said ; ‘but I should be wrong if I did not warn you that there may be something definite before long. In cases of this kind drugs are of very little service. I have, however——’ and here the usual two half sheets of note paper scrawled over with hieroglyphics were handed to Philip. ‘What I should advise,’ continued the doctor, ‘would be complete change of air and scene. You should take Mrs. Marescalchi down to the seaside, or, better still, to the Continent. Italy, for instance, would be a good country to go to at this season of the year. In her present state, a chill might be a serious matter.’ And so forth, and so forth.

As soon as the doctor was gone, Philip went straight into his dressing-room, locked himself in, and gave way to despair. At that moment he felt firmly persuaded that Fanny was going

to die, and the bare idea of such a catastrophe overwhelmed him with grief and remorse. There had not been much sympathy between them of late, and it was not so very long since he had been lamenting his folly in having ever married her ; but for these very reasons his pain was the greater now. He was in no mood for self-scrutiny; but if he had got to the bottom of his emotion he would have found that it was not so much the dread of his possible loss as intense pity for Fanny herself that was bringing the tears into his eyes. Death was to Philip the greatest of all possible ills, the one misfortune for which no consolation could be found, the end of everything. If he had been offered his choice between death and penal servitude for life he would have accepted the latter alternative without an instant's hesitation, and immediately begun calculating his chances of getting out on a ticket-of-leave. And if, indeed, this terrible thing should happen to poor Fanny, would it not be in a great measure his fault ? What evil spirit had prompted that doctor to mention the word Italy ? Italy ! as if a journey to Italy were as simple a thing as taking a hansom to Oxford Street ! What inhuman brutes doctors were ! 'Idiot that I was !' thought Philip ; 'why, while I was about it, didn't I ask the Signora for another thousand

pounds, instead of telling her the exact amount that I had to hand over to Salford the next day? I can't go back to her and ask her for more now. No, hang it all, I *can't* do that. And my poor little Fan must die because I haven't the money to pay for railway tickets! There's Meg—but she sent me money only a week ago; and what excuse could I make?'

At this moment there came a tap at the door, and presently Fanny herself entered.

'Philip,' said she, quietly, 'the doctor thinks I shall never get any better, doesn't he?'

'Never get any better,' cried Philip, immediately assuming an air of great cheerfulness; 'my dear child, what rubbish have you been taking into your head? He says there is nothing in the world the matter with you.'

Fanny smiled. 'You need not be afraid of telling me,' she said; 'I don't mind.'

'I do, though, whether you do or not—at least, I *should* mind. But I give you my word of honour that he assured me you had no disease at all, and one can't die without a disease, can one? What he said was that you were out of sorts and wanted a change. He spoke of the seaside, or—well, he suggested Italy, oddly enough.'

And then Philip broke out into lamentations. Italy, he said, was out of the question. He had

not liked to say so before ; but he had been thinking it over, and he had found that Italy would be altogether beyond them. He had been careless and extravagant, and there were a number of small bills hanging over him which he could not well leave the country without paying. And, worse than that, the money-box was pretty nearly empty. He was going on to express much self-reproach ; but Fanny interrupted him, and relieved him greatly by saying that she, too, had been thinking things over, and that she had come to the conclusion that she would not at all care about Italy just now. There was no pleasure in travelling when one was out of health, and she dreaded the fatigue ; and, in short, a week at Margate, if that could be managed, would suit her a great deal better.

Philip had not contrived to deceive her, but she was perfectly successful in deceiving him. Her first glimpse of his face, as she came into the room, had shown her his distress, and it was not to be thought of that he should distress himself on her account. She therefore addressed herself to the task of convincing him that her illness was an imaginary one ; and the task was easy enough, seeing that he asked nothing better than to be convinced. Perhaps he suspected that the activity which she displayed during the next few days was the result of an effort, that

her loquacity was scarcely natural, and her laughter a little forced ; but what then ? If she was struggling to free herself from the state of lethargy into which she had sunk since the child's death, so much the better. Was not her sickness, after all, rather one of the mind than of the body ? Women were like that ; their spirits always told upon their health. It did not take Philip long to reach the point of laughing at his first fears.

In the course of the following week he took Fanny down to Margate according to her wish, and the effect of the change was so speedily beneficial as to be almost startling. Margate is hardly what most people would consider a cheerful spot in the winter time ; but the clear air, the broad stretch of sea, and the sight of the breakers tumbling in were full of life and refreshment to a countrybred girl, who for twelve mortal months and more had had nothing but bricks and mortar to look at and only the smoke-laden atmosphere of London to breathe. It chanced also that there came in this month of February, as there often does, a fortnight of mild, spring-like weather, so that it was even possible to sit out on the sands in the sunshine, and, if the bathing-machines had not been hauled up out of sight, it would not have seemed an absolutely outrageous thing to contemplate a dip

in salt water. There was now no longer any occasion for Fanny to make believe. The fresh breezes brought the colour into her pale cheeks ; she felt her strength returning day by day ; she was able to take long walks with the best and kindest of husbands ; insensibly she was becoming reconciled to her great sorrow ; she, too, began to see glimpses of the woods of Arcady. Doctors are not always reassured by these very rapid improvements, which have something in common with the quick rise of the barometer after a fall ; but neither Philip nor Fanny knew much about doctors and disease, and were as anxious as everybody is to keep such subjects out of their minds.

It was a very pleasant and a very successful holiday, as far as it went ; but it did not go very far, nor could it last very long. Lack of money ; the remonstrances of Steinberger, who could not for the life of him understand what his pupil wanted to do at Margate at that season of the year ; a sudden shift of the wind into the north-east, with flying grey clouds and cat's-ice in every puddle—all these things combined to sound the recall, and to warn the wanderers that London, though it might have been forgotten, had not moved from its position, and was waiting to receive them back into its grimy embrace. That bleak north-easter accompanied them on

their homeward journey ; it made its way through the ill-fitting windows of the railway-carriage, chilling the travellers to their bones ; and it was the means of providing poor Fanny with a very definite complaint in the form of a sharp attack of bronchitis.

For a short time after their return to Conduit Street it seemed as if this attack was not likely to prove a serious one ; but afterwards the symptoms became more acute, and it was soon evident that the patient was in for a long and perhaps dangerous illness.

‘ Ah,’ said the doctor, who had again been summoned ; ‘ you ought to have taken my advice, Mr. Marescalchi ; you ought to have left England. I warned you, as you may remember, of the risk of these spring winds.’

‘ It is a pity that you did not insist more upon the point,’ said poor Philip, meekly ; ‘ but there is not much good in talking about that now. The question is, will she get over it ?’

‘ Now, my dear sir,’ remonstrated the doctor, who was certainly a very irritating person, ‘ what an unreasonable thing that is to ask ! How can I possibly tell what turn an illness may take ? Your wife’s age should be in her favour ; on the other hand, her state of debility is such that —that, in short, we must consider it an anxious case. Careful nursing may do much for her.’

This latter need was supplied by the advent of Aunt Keziah, who now once more took up her abode under Philip's roof; and it must be said for Aunt Keziah that she came out strong under the circumstances, sitting up all night, taking but a few hours' rest during the day, and absolutely refusing all professional assistance.

'None of your 'orspital nurses for me,' cried she, with the inveterate prejudice of her class. 'No stranger shall come near my sister's child so long as I have the use of my arms and legs, and that's flat. So you'll be so good as not mention the subjeck again to me, Philip, if you please.'

Philip no longer objected to be addressed by his Christian name. He was a great deal too miserable to pay attention to such trifles, and Mrs. Webber herself was moved to pity a man whom she secretly despised by the sight of his utterly woebegone aspect. He was not allowed to be much in the sick-room, where in truth he did no good and only got in the way; he could not bring himself to go out, and probably the hours that he spent in these days, standing at the window of the dingy drawing-room in Conduit Street and staring blankly at the passers-by and the cabmen on the stand below, were the most wretched of his whole life. He told Mrs. Webber that he only wished he were dying too;

and though she did not believe him, she was sorry for him, and she confided to the landlady, with whom she had struck up a friendship by the bedside of the sufferer, that she would say for that nevvvy of hers that he had a feeling heart.

It was not, however, in the man's nature to grieve long after this fashion. A slight improvement in Fanny's condition afforded him an excuse for recovering his spirits, for declaring that she would pull through now and be as well as ever again, and for resuming his neglected singing lessons. Throughout her long illness he alternated thus between the depths of despair and extravagant hopefulness ; but, as time went on, the latter became his usual state of mind. It was so much pleasanter to hope than to despair, and, as Mrs. Webber sagely remarked, hope was a thing as did harm to nobody.

Philip, then, began to go about and to see his friends much as before. He looked in at the Club occasionally ; had Walter Brune to dine with him once or twice, 'lest Meg should fancy that something had happened,' he said to himself ; he called at certain houses where he did not wish to be forgotten, and was persuaded to sing at a few afternoon entertainments. One person, however, he persistently avoided. It has passed into a proverb that the surest way to

lose sight of a friend is to lend him money ; but it was not an overburdening sense of obligation alone that caused Philip to steer clear of Signora Tommasini, inventing heaven knows how many cunningly-devised fables to account for his neglect, and despatching them to her by post. He was afraid that if he were to find himself alone with this sympathising and generous ally, she might get his secret out of him. His nerves, he knew, were not to be depended upon at this time, and a kind word might cause him to betray himself in a manner which he would probably afterwards regret. Philip had seen more of women than of men during his life, and had perhaps learnt to understand some of their peculiarities. He hardly believed in the common report that the Signora harboured matrimonial designs upon him ; but at the same time he felt very sure that she would not be pleased to hear that he was already married. Therefore he judged it best to keep out of danger's way.

Meanwhile Fanny was growing slowly better. Better, that is, in a certain sense ; for, although all risk from the bronchitis was over, she was still too weak to get up. Those who watched her said that she would be up in another week ; then, when that time had elapsed, they put the event off for yet another week, and after that the

subject of her leaving her bed was dropped altogether. She herself was well aware that she would never leave it alive ; and one morning she said as much to Philip, begging him not to be angry with her for telling the truth.

Philip, nevertheless, made a great show of being angry, scolded her for giving way to gloomy fancies, pointed out that, if she were as ill as she supposed, she would never have got over the bronchitis, and declared that she was doing all that she could to retard her recovery by allowing herself to think that there was any doubt about it. But she laid her thin hand on his arm, looking up at him deprecatingly, and his voice died away.

‘ We can’t always go on pretending, can we, dear?’ said she. ‘ I know you will be sorry at first ; and I should like to stay with you—for some things. But I don’t mind going. Before I was so ill—at the time just after dear baby died—I used to be very miserable, and sometimes I fancied that you—well, that you did not care for me quite so much as you once did. But that is all over, and we won’t talk about it. I used to be wicked enough to think that you would be rather glad to get rid of me ; I don’t think that now. But, Philip, while I have been lying here I have thought over a great many things, and I can see that it is better—oh, ever

so much better!—as it is. You will think so, too, some day.'

Didn't he almost think so already? The question flashed across Philip's consciousness, and was gone before he had time to fix it there.

'Some day,' Fanny went on, 'you will see that it would have been impossible ever to change me into a lady. Though I think I have improved a little,' she could not help adding; 'I don't leave out my h's now, do I? And my hands are not red any more—but perhaps that is because I am so ill.'

'Fan!' exclaimed Philip, half laughing, half crying, 'you are the greatest goose that ever lived. You break my heart when you talk like that. Did I ever accuse you of not being a lady?'

'No, dear,' she answered consideringly; 'I don't know that you ever did. But of course I thought about it a good deal; and then Aunt Keziah used to go on about silk purses and sow's ears. Poor Aunt Keziah! we should have had to cut her, I suppose; and I don't think I could have borne to do that. Nobody knows how good and kind she has been to me all this time.'

Philip dropped on his knees by the side of the bed, exclaiming, 'Oh, hush, my darling! you are not going to die; you are not going to have any more trouble. I will work all day for you, and

you shall have everything you can wish for, and your Aunt Keziah shall be welcome whenever she chooses to come to us, if only you will get well and be my own bright little Fan again.'

Perhaps he would not have been so overcome, perhaps he would not have said so much as this, if he had not felt that there was no hope. Fanny, for her part, was not at all overcome. She looked at him half wonderingly and with a great kindness and pity, as she passed her wasted hand over his hair. Already the hand of death was upon her, and she saw the world with the clear eyes of those who are passing for ever beyond the reach of its pettinesses. She understood her husband better now than she had ever done in the happy days that were past; but she did not love him the less because she understood him. There was a certain helplessness about the man which endeared him to all women, and made them hate to see him suffer, even though they might know that his suffering would not last long.

'It is much better as it is,' she repeated. 'We have had a very happy time together, my dear, and there's nothing to regret—no quarrels nor cross words; nothing, except baby's death. And now I am so glad—oh, so *glad* that I have not left him behind me.' Her face lighted up and the tears came into her eyes, as she thought of

this. 'And, Philip, you must not make yourself miserable about me after I am gone. You must see plenty of people, and be always busy; and then, after a time, if you wished—if you thought that you——'

She broke off, and glanced up inquiringly.

'I mean, if you ever thought of marrying again, you must not suppose that I should mind. I think I should like you to have some one to take care of you; I think, perhaps, some day, you will marry that Nellie Brune whom you used to talk to me about sometimes. Your people rather wished it, didn't they?'

'My people?' said Philip, 'I have got no people. Meg—Mrs. Stanniforth, you know—has an idea of something of the kind, I believe; but I don't want to marry Nellie—or anybody. Besides, she has no money.'

'Hasn't she?' said Fanny, dreamily. 'But you will make money; and it would never do for you to marry a woman for the sake of her fortune; she would find it out, and then you would both be miserable. No, you will marry Nellie Brune; and you needn't tell her anything about me, and so it will all pass away and be forgotten. She repeated several times 'all be forgotten—all forgotten.'

Philip stood silently watching her for a long time. Once or twice she murmured Nellie

Brune's name and once or twice his own, and so fell asleep with a smile upon her lips.

After this day many weeks elapsed during which Fanny grew apparently neither better nor worse. She suffered no pain, slept a great deal, and during her waking hours seemed quite content to lie still and listen to Aunt Keziah, who had produced a well-thumbed Bible, and would read long extracts from it in a loud, unmodulated voice. Seeing her so calm, Philip, too, became easier in mind. The violence of his first grief had spent itself, and was beyond his recalling ; he began to admit, as Fanny had done, that all was for the best. Acquiescence in the inevitable was with him not so much a part of philosophy as of nature, and when one thing was past hoping for, he could not for the life of him help turning his eyes towards something else. There even came a time when he almost wished for the end of the present state of affairs. The doctor apprehended no immediate danger, would not yet say that the case was an absolutely hopeless one, thought it quite possible that his patient might linger on through the spring and summer months, and so forth ; and in the meantime Philip's bills were mounting up ; Margaret was writing anxious and urgent letters, begging him to come down and see her, if it were only for a few days ; Walter Brune, too, seemed to suspect

that there was some mystery afoot. Perhaps it was hardly strange that Philip should half long for the liberty that might be so near. He only half longed for it; he was ashamed of the thoughts that would sometimes force their way into his mind, and a chance word or look from Fanny sufficed to convert him, for the time, into as heartbroken a husband as Aunt Keziah could have wished to contemplate.

After all, he had not long to wait for the end. When it came, it seemed to have come suddenly, though, in truth, nothing could have been more gradual than its approach. Little by little the dying woman's brain had been giving way, for some days she had scarcely recognised any one and had been somewhat excited at times, 'talking a deal of rubbitch,' as Mrs. Webber said, and asking constantly for her baby to be brought to her. Still, it was not supposed that she was much worse than she had been until one evening when she began to complain of being cold, and nothing that they could do would warm her; and then Mrs. Webber, who, as she mentioned with a sort of pride, 'had seen many a one die afore now,' knew what was coming.

'She'll go off quite quiet, you'll see,' said this person of experience, nodding at Philip, who was holding Fanny's hand, 'they mostly in general do. There's some as die hard, as you

might say, and there's some as die easy ; there's them as is ready to meet their Maker, and them as didn't ought for to feel so. But, lor, dear me ! when it comes to the last, 'tis much the same with them all.'

But Philip was not listening to the results of Mrs. Webber's observations, for he had felt a sudden pressure of his hand ; and now Fanny's eyes were opened wide, she was looking at him in a troubled way, and was evidently trying to say something. He bent down his head to catch any faint whisper that might pass her lips ; but all at once her voice came back to her, and she spoke quite loud, though with long pauses between the words.

' Dear—I wanted to say—I'm so sorry—I let the fire out—that night.'

' She's a wandering, poor dear !' said Aunt Keziah. But Philip understood what that fond and foolish little wife of his was thinking of. With her feet upon the very brink of the dark river, she had been confusedly trying to examine her conscience, and it had accused her of no worse offence than this.

Those were her last words. She closed her eyes as soon as she had uttered them ; and so faint was her breathing that neither of the bystanders could have told the precise moment at which her heart ceased to beat.

They buried her beside her baby in the saddest, dreariest cemetery in the world, not excepting Père-la-Chaise. A fine, drizzling rain was falling while the brief rite was hurried through; and as Philip turned away from the grave he shuddered from head to foot, muttering, 'I shall never be able to come back here again.'

'I don't think as you ever will come back, sir,' said Mrs. Webber, quietly.

Mrs. Webber was quite respectful now; and if there was any sarcasm in her speech, it was only sarcasm of that deferential kind which inferiors may permit themselves to use towards their superiors. Philip was Mr. Marescalchi again now; he was no longer her nephew, no longer a man over whom she had the smallest hold; and, being a sensible woman, she recognised the change.

Philip walked hastily out of the burying-ground, and hailed the first hansom that he met. The sun burst out as he was whirled through the crowded streets back to London, back to the world, back to life and liberty. He tried to feel unhappy, but he could not. His spirits rose in spite of himself; a great weight was off his mind; he was free! When he reached Conduit Street the blinds had been drawn up, the sun was streaming through the open windows into the shabby little drawing-room, which had been

swept and made tidy during his absence. There was nothing here to remind him that he had ever been a husband and a father; all poor Fanny's things had been carried away by Aunt Keziah; Aunt Keziah herself was gone back to Islington, never to cross his path again. He was like the widower in the ballad, 'a youth light-hearted and content.' Truly his star had been favourable to him. He had done a foolish thing, but no disgraceful one. At that moment Philip was not very far from thinking that he had had such wonderful luck because he had deserved to be lucky. Would not anyone who had heard the history of his relations with Fanny have said that he had behaved like a gentleman throughout? How many men would have married a girl from a confectioner's shop? How many, having married her, would have remained true to her from first to last, risking detection for her sake, risking ridicule, risking social ruin, and hardly giving so much as a thought to these dangers?

Then, while he yet exulted, there came upon him a sudden and complete revulsion of feeling. He remembered that he was alone; that it was not in the least a question of what others might say of him, but of what he might be able to say of himself to himself. For one moment he saw the truth—saw that he was glad that Fanny

was dead; glad that that kind and faithful heart would never flutter with delight again when he came home at night to recount his triumphs; glad that he should never again throughout all eternity hear the sound of the childish laughter which had once been so sweet to him. He saw that he had never really cared for her—nay, that he had never really cared for any single person or thing in the wide world but himself.

There is something so hideous, so revolting in utter selfishness that it is a very good thing indeed for some of us that it usually brings mental blindness with it. Philip was so scared by the spectre which he had raised that the thought of spending an evening alone with it was one that he could not by any means face. Therefore he dined at his Club, and afterwards went to the opera, where he saw and spoke to Signora Tommasini for the first time for many weeks.

‘I have been ill,’ he said shortly, in answer to her pertinacious inquiries as to where he had been during all this long interval; and she believed him, for, in truth, his face looked pale and drawn, and he seemed altogether unlike himself.

CHAPTER XXI.

TWO FLATTERING OFFERS.

LIFE in the country generally, and life in the neighbourhood of Crayminster somewhat more particularly, is seldom remarkable for abundance of incident; and upon the principle that the safest thing for a sailor to do with his head, when in the heat of action, is to thrust it through a hole made in the side of the ship by a cannon-ball, it may be assumed that, after such an eventful day as that through which Miss Brune had just passed when we took leave of her in the month of November, nothing more of a startling nature was likely to happen to her for some time to come. To be run away with, to be thrown from one's horse, to receive and reject an offer of marriage, all within the twenty-four hours, is indeed to draw rather recklessly upon one's fair average of excitement; and Nellie, who, as it may be remembered, had been a good deal bored and eager for any small trifle in the way of novelty before these things had taken

place, was abundantly satisfied with what she had got, and asked for nothing better than a further period of repose and dulness in which to recover herself.

Such a period did in due course follow, and lasted for a matter of six weeks ; but at the expiration of that time a truly remarkable piece of experience fell to Nellie's share—a piece of experience such as no woman ever quite forgets, and which is looked back upon with a certain degree of pride by all and with heartfelt regret by a good many. It was towards the end of December that the county was roused to a high pitch of interest and expectation by the re-appearance of the Duke of Retford, who, being still shut out of his Yorkshire mansion, had selected Craybridge to pass Christmas at, as being upon the whole the least comfortless of the many country houses that belonged to him. He came down in quite a patriarchal fashion, accompanied or speedily followed by numerous relatives, and among these was his eldest son.

Now this young man had greatly liked and admired Nellie during his stay at Craybridge at the time of the festivities consequent upon his coming of age ; and so sincere had been his admiration that he had not at all forgotten her, although five whole months had passed away since he had bidden her farewell. One of the

first things, therefore, that he did upon finding himself once more within reach of her was to ride over to Broom Leas, where he was so kindly received that he discovered a series of pretexts for repeating his visit three times in little more than a week. About Christmas time his parents, as in duty bound, gave a ball at which he danced a great many times with Nellie—thereby exciting much surprise and envy, and not a little spitefulness. After that there came a ten days' frost, which afforded additional opportunities for neighbourly intercourse; and the outcome of it all was that, while the new year was still young, the Most Honourable the Marquis of Craybridge made a formal offer of his hand and all the contingent glories belonging thereto to Miss Brune.

It may be asserted without ill nature—and, in truth, there is nothing ill-natured in the assertion—that the number of women in England who could relinquish without a pang the prospect of becoming a duchess may be counted upon the fingers of one hand. Nellie Brune, at any rate, was not one of that select and high-minded few. She would have liked very much to be a duchess, and to be rich and powerful, and to hold out a helping hand to her brothers in their several professions, and to wear the famous Retford diamonds, and to step at once and with-

out an effort from the respectable but obscure ranks of the country gentry into the inner circle of the highest society of her native land. All this would have been exceedingly pleasant to her; and yet she felt that she could not marry Lord Craybridge. She refused him with an honest sigh, but she did refuse him.

The young man was very much astonished, which was natural enough—and rather angry, which showed a want of proper feeling on his part, but was also, perhaps, not unnatural. Of course, in a manner of speaking, Miss Brune was worthy of an imperial throne; but, contemplating things from a common-sense and every-day standpoint, she really was hardly in a position to treat marquises as though they were made of mere common clay. This marquis had been willing to set the wishes of his parents at defiance, and to brave the displeasure of his entire family for her sake. He had thought rather well of himself for being so independent, and it certainly had never entered into his head that any opposition to his desires could come from her. He was a very young man and a somewhat hot-tempered one, and he could not help letting her see something of what he thought respecting her conduct in this matter. Thereupon she, too, became angry, and told him he had a vulgar mind; and so high words passed, and the inter-

view was nearly ending in a mortal quarrel. Lord Craybridge, however, regained his self-control in time to avert so undignified a parting. He confessed that he had forgotten himself, begged for forgiveness, and was forgiven. Would there be any hope for him at any future time? he asked. Nellie replied that she was very sorry, but that there never could be any hope for him at all. He then observed that he didn't care what became of him now, and departed declaring that he should live and die a bachelor, and expressing a hope that his demise might speedily ensue. And about three weeks afterwards he proposed to the beautiful Lady Hilda Montacute, by whom he was accepted; and they were married with great pomp at Westminster Abbey in the spring, and lived happily ever afterwards.

The foregoing episode, having only an indirect bearing upon the course of the present story, has been somewhat condensed in narration; but the various workings of it occupied a large portion of Nellie's time and thoughts during the winter, and it was the means of exalting her beyond measure in the estimation of her neighbours; for it need hardly be said that the whole county heard all about it, the news having leaked out and been promulgated in the usual mysterious way. Ladies are not supposed to reveal the names of their rejected suitors (as a matter of

fact they generally do reveal them, but that is neither here nor there), and in the present instance Nellie was as reticent as the strictest code of social ethics could have required her to be. Besides her father, she only communicated the circumstance to Mrs. Stanniforth, who was almost like a mother to her; and every lady is allowed to have one confidant. Margaret, again, was anything but a garrulous person; but when Mrs. Winnington sneered openly at Nellie for having so signally failed to 'catch poor Mr. Stanniforth,' how was it possible to resist the temptation of proving that a much more eligible *parti* than Tom Stanniforth had been declined by the young lady? Proving is perhaps hardly the right word to use, inasmuch as there could be no tangible proof adduced in support of the statement, and indeed Mrs. Winnington declared at once and without hesitation that she didn't believe a word of it. Nature, however, was too strong for Mrs. Winnington, and, despite her expressed incredulity, she could not help treating Nellie from that day forth with a wondering respect which its subject was puzzled to account for.

As for Margaret, her joy over the discomfiture of Lord Craybridge was extreme. There could be but one reason, she thought, for his rejection; and, being quite satisfied now as to the state of Nellie's affections, she became more than ever

anxious for Philip to return. Philip, his doings and his prospects, were the most frequent subject of conversation between the two ladies. It was a comfort to the elder to have some one within reach who understood and appreciated that paragon, while the younger was glad to be able to speak without repugnance of one, at least, among the persons in whom her kind friend was interested. Mrs. Winnington, back from her autumn manœuvres in the west, and upon the whole not ill-pleased with the results thereof, was more than usually out of sympathy with them both at this time. When Margaret hesitatingly informed her of the career which Philip had chosen for himself, she remarked drily that she was not at all surprised, but that for her part she did not care about including a mountebank in the list of her acquaintances; and to Nellie she made herself objectionable by intimating in no ambiguous language that Tom Stanniforth's engagement to Edith might now be looked upon as very nearly an accomplished fact. She had encountered Mr. Stanniforth, it appeared, in the course of her peregrinations, and had—or said she had—been given to understand pretty clearly by him what his ambition was. 'I have not breathed a word upon the subject to dear Edith; I would never interfere in such a matter. I fancy, though, that I can foresee her

answer, and I really think that in many ways she will have chosen wisely. Rank, after all, is not everything, and dear Mr. Stanniforth is so good—such a thoroughly sterling and genuine character.'

Nellie, albeit not unprepared for this intelligence, was profoundly disgusted by it, and said some bitter things to Margaret about the ease with which Edith had got over her attachment to poor Walter. Not even to Margaret had she ever disclosed what had passed between her and Mr. Stanniforth on that memorable November afternoon, but in her heart she condemned him no less severely than the young woman to whom he had so promptly transferred his allegiance. To be sure, she did not want to marry him herself, and it was nothing to her whom he might choose to marry; but she thought he might have had the decency to wait a little longer. He had taken rather a liberty in asking her to be his wife at all; but that he should have asked her in that sort of way, simply because he wanted a wife—any wife—was just a little bit too insulting. One is sorry to have to record weaknesses on the part of one's heroine; but it is a fact that when Edith complained that Nellie Brune never met her now without sniffing at her, she was not going far beyond the limits of truth.

There were thus many little daily pin-pricks

which served not only to strengthen the friendship which had subsisted for so long between Margaret and her young neighbour, but to narrow the stream of their common interests into one channel. If some people thought that Philip would lower himself and those connected with him by singing for his supper, like little Tom Tucker, that was by no means Miss Brune's opinion. On the contrary, she applauded his resolution with a heartiness that quite reassured Margaret, who, as we have seen, had had some misgivings upon the point at first. Why, Nellie pertinently inquired, should it be considered a more honourable occupation to plead the cause of murderers and forgers than to afford innocent pleasure to people of refinement? Did anybody dare to look down upon artists nowadays? And was not a great singer just as much an artist as a great painter? What was really disgraceful was to eat the bread of idleness; and that was what she had sometimes feared that Philip might be contented to do. Now she said she should always feel proud of him.

Speeches of this kind were very soothing and encouraging to Margaret, and went far towards consoling her for the uneasiness which she felt at Philip's protracted absence. He was always writing to say that he meant to come and see her as soon as ever he could find the

time, but somehow or other he never did find the time ; and a vague rumour connecting his name with that of Signora Tommasini trickled down to Crayminster, and gave Margaret (who had never seen the Signora, and supposed her to be a young and fascinating creature) a terrible fright. At length, however, there came a letter to announce that Philip proposed to revisit Longbourne at Easter, and that he hoped to be able to remain there for some weeks. This joyful news was at once transmitted to Broom Leas by Margaret, who mentioned with regret that the same post had brought her a refusal from Tom Stanniforth. 'I hoped he might have been able to run down for Easter too,' she said; 'but he tells me he will be busy all through the recess.'

'Oh, what a good thing!' exclaimed Nellie, clasping her hands involuntarily.

Her ejaculation had been called forth by the latter piece of intelligence, but Margaret naturally set it down to gratification at the former. And in truth Nellie was very glad to see Philip again. He arrived, looking very pale and fagged, as he might have been expected to do after a long spell of hard labour, and was made much of by the ladies whose admiration he chiefly coveted. Margaret, of course, would have petted him under any circumstances; but he was

not prepared to meet with so kind a reception at the hands of Nellie, having found her on previous occasions more of a critic than a sympathiser. Now she was amiability itself. She made him sing to her; she praised his voice in terms more enthusiastic than any that had yet flattered his ears (poor Fanny had hardly known one note from another); she prophesied a triumphant success for him, and listened with much interest to all that he would tell her about his life in London.

This sort of thing delighted Philip, and so, for that matter, did everything connected with Longbourne and the ordinary course of existence there. He had been for so many months without the small luxuries and refinements which go with wealth, that he had almost forgotten what they were like, and valued them doubly now that they were once more within his reach. Even such trifling matters as a constant supply of clean towels in his bedroom and the finding of his clothes ready brushed and laid out for him when he wanted them were productive of a great deal of pleasure to him, and he sometimes found himself marvelling how he could have put up so cheerfully with the wretched discomforts of Coomassie Villa and Conduit Street. But it was not often that he thought of Coomassie Villa and Conduit

Street, or of his residence there, at all. That era of his life already belonged to the past, and had been pushed into a pigeon-hole of his memory, to be looked at occasionally, or to be forgotten altogether, as chance might decree. His thoughts now were occupied entirely with the present; and a very agreeable sort of present it was, taking it all in all. Plenty of well-drilled servants to minister to his wants, good things to eat, the best of wines to drink, soft-voiced, well-bred women to talk to—these things sufficed, at least for the time being, to satisfy his soul. The season of the year, too, was delicious. The white, bright sunlight of spring was rousing the sleeping earth to life; the chestnut buds were bursting; the fruit-trees were covered with starry blossoms, which fell like miniature snowstorms before every puff of the soft west wind; the thrushes and blackbirds could be heard in the cool mornings; all nature was preparing for a fresh start; and what could be more fitting than that the heart of this young man should lightly turn in the usual direction?

It must not, however, be supposed that Philip had learnt so little from experience as to think in any serious fashion of paying his addresses to Nellie Brune. He said to himself, with a smile, that Margaret would never induce him to do that, charm she never so wisely. Of

the pinch of poverty he had had more than enough to last him his lifetime, and to convince him that matrimonial happiness was quite irreconcilable with straitened means. He was nevertheless—so he believed—deeply in love with Nellie. He had always suspected himself of being so; and now various subtle influences, some of which have been enumerated, turned his suspicion into certainty. All this being so, a delicately scrupulous youth might have thought it his duty to keep out of the maiden's way, lest perchance he should delude her with hopes which could never be fulfilled; but Philip, it is scarcely necessary to say, did not pursue any such course. What he did was to resume his chronic flirtation with Nellie just where he had left it, throwing a little more ardour into his words and looks as beseemed the increased reality of his passion, and, for the rest, allowing himself to drift down stream, in accordance with his old habit, with a languid, pleased curiosity as to what might be going to happen to him next.

One morning, about a fortnight after his return, he made his appearance at Broom Leas in an evident state of suppressed excitement, and hardly gave himself time to say good morning before he attacked Miss Brune with a direct question.

‘I say, Nellie, is it a fact that you refused Craybridge last winter?’

Nellie, who at that moment was standing in one of the paddocks, trying to induce a shy young colt to accept a lump of sugar from her hand, whisked round abruptly, and threw her lump of sugar away.

‘Who told you of that?’ she asked. ‘Was it Mrs. Stanniforth? She promised me that she would not mention it to anybody.’

‘No, it wasn’t Meg. I heard it last night at the Club at Crayminster.’

‘The Club?—how disgusting! How do people find these things out? I wish they would mind their own business.’

‘Everybody knows everything; it can’t be helped,’ said Philip. ‘I must confess that if a duchess had proposed to me, and I had refused her, I should immediately publish the fact abroad myself. You really did refuse him, then?’

‘Yes, I really did. Wonderful; wasn’t it?’

‘Upon my word,’ answered Philip, looking at her curiously, ‘I think it was rather wonderful. Why in the world did you do it, Nellie?’

Nellie laughed. ‘Why did I refuse him? Well, for the best of all reasons; I didn’t care enough about him to marry him.’

‘And you call that the best of all reasons?’ ejaculated Philip, with uplifted hands.

‘Ah!’ said Nellie, with a touch of scorn, ‘you can’t understand any girl’s resisting the eldest son of a duke.’

‘I could only understand it upon one supposition,’ answered Philip, slowly; ‘that there was some one else whom she liked better.’

He pronounced the last words in a low voice, keeping his eyes on the ground as he spoke. He raised them just in time to encounter Nellie’s, which were blazing with anger, while a fine rush of colour had overspread her face.

‘Philip,’ she cried, ‘you are very impertinent!’

‘What a little spitfire you are, Nellie! Surely such old friends as you and I may say anything to each other. However, I apologise humbly, and beg leave to withdraw the remark, since it makes you so angry.’

‘I am not a bit angry,’ returned Nellie; ‘but I don’t think anybody ought to say a thing like that. To begin with, it is quite untrue; and besides——’

‘What besides?’

‘Well, I hate that sort of thing being said about me. What business have you and your friends at the Crayminster Club to discuss me

at all? I thought ladies' names were never mentioned at clubs.'

'Gracious goodness ! what could have made you suppose that? All the same, you might have known that I should not discuss you, nor allow you to be discussed, in any club of which I was a member. A man happened to mention to me that there was a rumour to the effect that you had refused Craybridge, and asked me whether it was true; that was all.'

'Very well; I don't want to hear any more about it. Let us change the subject.'

Philip did as he was bid; but although he ceased to speak of the subject, he did not by any means cease to think of it ; and, at the risk of lowering him still further in the esteem of the reader, it must be confessed that he shared in some degree in the respect which Mrs. Winnington felt for a girl who did not care about becoming Duchess of Retford. For this he shall be despised as much as the reader may think fit ; but it would be hardly fair to blame him for believing that the astonishing sacrifice in question had been made for his sake. Margaret had no sort of doubt upon the point, and did not hesitate to say as much when consulted ; while Nelly's confusion and wrath had seemed to tell their own tale in tolerably plain language. No wonder that Philip should have

concluded that the prize—if prize it were—might be his for the asking. And from that day forth he began to think that perhaps he would ask for it. After all, there was nothing to deter him from doing so, except the dread of privations ; and was it not a matter of certainty that in a few years' time he would be in receipt of an income nearly, if not quite, as large as Signora Tommasini's? At the same time he was not inclined to do anything hastily. It has been said before that Philip was fond of a certain careless method of self-study, and it would have been strange indeed if he had not found out this much about himself, that none of his passions or desires were very deep-rooted. He certainly would not have broken his heart if Nellie had married Lord Craybridge ; he did not suppose that his heart would break if she were to do so even now ; though the notion of her belonging to any one else was an excessively painful one to him. Delay, then, could do no harm, and might possibly be productive of good ; and so he came round to his old comfortable determination to wait upon events.

It will be obvious to any one who cares to be at the trouble of thinking over the situation that only a very small event was required, under these circumstances, to overcome Philip's prudence and hurry him into a declaration ; and

such an event came to pass, not many days later, on the occasion of a dinner-party at Longbourne. It was a large dinner-party—one of those dinner-parties which are given only in the country, where anything like a selection of company is not to be thought of, and where, if the table be big enough, everybody must be asked on the same day, lest unworthy suspicions should arise of a second division of guests having been invited to eat up the leavings of the first. All the magnates of the surrounding district and various clerical dignitaries from Crayminster were present at it ; and, as some of them did not happen to be upon speaking terms, Mrs. Winnington had large opportunities for the display of tact, and enjoyed herself very much.

Philip also had been accustomed to derive a good deal of quiet enjoyment from these periodical feasts, which, indeed, were rich in humorous incident to the appreciative spectator ; but this time he was not amused at all. In the first place there was nobody to laugh with him, Margaret being too busy, and Nellie otherwise occupied ; and then he was disagreeably conscious of being overlooked. In London he had always been somebody ; people had thought him very clever and diverting, and had listened to him when he talked ; he had also been a celebrity in a small way by reason of his well-

known talents. But the fame of these had not penetrated so far as Crayminster, or, if it had, was not thought much of there. The squires and the canons, with their respective wives, who met round Mrs. Stanniforth's dining-table, knew Mr. Marescalchi only as a dependent of hers, and, if they noticed him at all, considered him rather a poor sort of fellow. He had no claims upon the admiration of any of them. He had not distinguished himself at Oxford, he was not seen in the hunting field; and, for all that, he gave himself airs and looked conceited. Philip, therefore, was thrust completely into the background. But perhaps he would not have minded that so much if Nellie Brune had not received such marked recognition from all quarters; and that again he would not perhaps have minded so much if the younger men of the party had been less assiduous in their attentions to her. Some of these young men were rich; one, in particular, had just come into an estate which was said to be worth ten thousand a year, and he was a good-looking fellow into the bargain. It was he who took Miss Brune in to dinner; and when Philip saw him devoting himself to her in a most conspicuous manner, and Nellie accepting his devotion with every appearance of complacency, he began to be assailed by the pangs of jealousy.

If he had used his reasoning powers, he must have perceived that, having triumphed over the rivalry of a future duke, he could have little to fear from a mere country gentleman; but when a man is in love—and Philip, it must be remembered, was really in love—his reasoning powers are seldom at their best. Besides, what he experienced was not so much a dread that Nelly might marry the eligible youth as intense dislike to seeing her monopolised by anybody but himself. In the drawing-room, after dinner, things were very nearly as bad. Nellie was then surrounded by a compact body of men, young and old, married and single, and there was no getting near her. So he retired in disgust, and tried to get a rise out of Mrs. Winnington by making violent love to Edith; but here again he was doomed to failure. Edith sat bolt upright in her chair, looking absolutely blank and not listening to a word that he said, and Mrs. Winnington was no longer to be drawn by that threadbare stratagem.

The evening was long and dull, as such evenings must inevitably be, and probably no one in the room was more bored by it than Philip. It ended, however, with one of those strokes of luck which fell to his share so frequently that he had come to look upon them

as in some sort his birthright. Mr. Brune, who had been obliged to go up to London for the day, and who was to return by the last train, had arranged that the brougham which was to bring him up from the station should proceed to Longbourne afterwards and fetch his daughter. But as this could not be much before midnight, as the last of the guests departed while the clock was striking eleven, and as there was a brilliant moon outside, Miss Brune took it into her head that she would prefer to walk, and anticipated the proposition that was on Philip's lips by asking him point-blank to see her home.

It was thus that Philip, having thrown the reins upon the neck of events, found himself gently hurried by them along a path which he was not unwilling to follow. The time and the hour had evidently come ; the *mise en scène*, as he said to himself with a little inward laugh, was quite what it ought to be. Here were silence, solitude, a sleeping world bathed in the mysterious silvery light of the moon ; here was the beloved object tripping by his side across the broad black shadows of the lime-trees ; it only remained for him to say what he had to say in as pretty and apposite words as he could command. And long before the lodge had come in sight he had said it. His heart beat a little more quickly while he waited for his answer,

but only a little more quickly ; seeing that he had not really any doubt at all as to what that answer would be.

Apparently it was Nellie Brune's fate to astonish her suitors. She astonished Philip very much indeed ; for she not only walked on without replying, but she did not even look at him, or turn away her head and allow him to gain possession of her hand, or signify her consent in any fashion whatsoever. He was obliged at last to repeat his question ; and then she answered, as coolly as if she had been remarking that it was a fine night, ' I was thinking.'

After that she walked on for several yards in silence, and then said, ' Philip, are you quite sure that you wish this? '

' Nellie ! ' he exclaimed reproachfully.

' I mean, do you really wish it very much? Because, unless you do——'

If there was an art of which Philip was complete master, it was that of love-making. He was always so thoroughly in earnest for the moment. He begged and implored now as humbly as if he had not felt certain in his heart of success ; he protested—believing firmly in the truth of the statement, as he made it—that Nellie had been the one love of his life ; he reminded her of the vows which they had exchanged as children, and assured her that he

had never in reality swerved from his allegiance. He acknowledged that she had every right to think him fickle ; he had, as she knew, had many other fancies ; but they had only been fancies. In short, he had been a boy ; and now he was a man, and knew his own mind. All this, and a great deal more, he said ; winding up with a candid avowal that he had not intended to tell her of his love so soon. He had felt that he ought not to speak so long as he had not a home and an assured income to offer ; and this was why she had perhaps fancied him lukewarm.

‘ That was not quite what I meant,’ answered Nellie, as soon as he had done. ‘ I have known for a long time that Mrs. Stanniforth wished this very much, and lately I have thought that you wished it too—in a way. Only it struck me that, if you were not very much set upon it, it would be so much nicer to—go on as we are. I can’t explain exactly,’ she went on, speaking more rapidly ; ‘ but, do you know, Philip, I am afraid sometimes that I have no heart. I am fond of you ; I have been very fond of you all my life. You always came next to Walter.’

‘ Next to Walter !’ ejaculated Philip in doleful accents.

‘ I am very sorry ; I can’t help it,’ said

Nellie penitently. 'I thought I ought to tell you.'

The blow to Philip's vanity was so severe and so unexpected that he could not help laughing a little, though he felt very sore.

'The long and the short of it is,' said he, 'that I have been ass enough to flatter myself that you cared for me as I do for you, when all the time you have had nothing but a sort of sisterly affection for me. I have brought this upon myself, and I must try to make the best of it, that's all.'

She saw that he was hurt, though he spoke so lightly, and she looked up at him with a humble, deprecating gaze which rather puzzled him. 'It isn't only a sort of affection,' she said; 'it's a great deal more than that.'

Suddenly it flashed across Philip that here was a new variety of the genus woman. He had heard of girls who could not acknowledge to themselves that they were in love until they were taught to do so; he believed that in the early years of the century all women were like that, or were supposed to be so. Might not this one, who was country-bred, be a survival of that bygone type?

'Nellie!' he exclaimed triumphantly, seizing her by both hands, 'I believe you do love me, in spite of all you say! Tell me one thing:

did you ever meet another man whom you could by any possibility have thought of marrying?’

‘No,’ she answered promptly and decidedly ; ‘certainly not.’

‘Then——!’ cried Philip.

‘Ah, but,’ she interrupted, drawing back from him, ‘I don’t think I love even you enough to marry you. At least, I don’t think I love you in the right way. I wish I did ; but I’m afraid I don’t.’

‘Nellie,’ said Philip gravely, ‘don’t throw away your happiness and mine like this. I won’t ask you for a final answer to-night ; but to-morrow, or the day after, if you like, you shall tell me whether I may hope for all that I care to live for, or whether I am to go straight to the dogs—as I certainly shall, if I have nothing in life to look forward to.’

She caught at this respite eagerly, promising that, if it were possible, it should be as he wished ; but entreating him not to conclude that, because she had not said No at once, she might not be forced to do so afterwards. She did not understand herself, she said, and could not expect that he should understand her.

But Philip understood perfectly well that the battle was as good as won.

CHAPTER XXII.

MRS. PROSSER'S SENSE OF DUTY.

THERE are few states in life more vexatious and humiliating than that of not knowing one's own mind. It is also absurd, for what should be easier than to discover whether one personally desires a thing or not? When the wishes or advantage of others have to be taken into consideration, some degree of indecision may be pardonable ; but Nellie Brune could not plead any such complications as an excuse for her inability to solve the problem set before her. She knew perfectly well that she might send Philip about his business without any fear of permanently blighting a fair existence, and she very properly concluded that all she had to do was to satisfy herself of her own inclinations in the matter. It was therefore especially provoking to one of her rather impatient temperament to find that this was what she could not accomplish, and that after many hours of shilly-shallying she was not only in as much doubt as

ever upon the main point of whether she could accept the man or not, but also puzzled to account to herself for a very decided feeling of anxiety to accept him if she could.

In this perplexity she resolved to adopt a course which, if not wise, was at any rate calculated to put an end to suspense. She went to Mrs. Stanniforth and begged for enlightenment and advice. From the responsibility thus cast upon her it may be well supposed that Margaret did not for one moment shrink. She began by embracing Nellie, and saying how delighted she was that things had all come right at last, and then proceeded to laugh heartily at the girl's misgivings. Lookers-on, she remarked with much originality, saw most of the game, and it was a very long time since she had begun to watch this one, and to perceive the signification of all its moves.

‘Poor Philip!’ she said compassionately; ‘I can quite understand now why he has kept away from us all these months. Philip has more pride than people think, and of course he would rather not have spoken until he had some thousands a year to lay at your feet. But the thousands will come all in good time; and if you have to begin with the hundreds—what of that? You must remember that you are my children, both of you, and that it is a mother’s

privilege to help her children out, when she can. As for you, my dear Nellie, you are simply made up of pride, or you wouldn't mind acknowledging the truth. Why, you silly child, you have been in love with Philip all your life, and I could prove it to you without any difficulty if I chose. But I will only ask you one thing. Why did you refuse Lord Craybridge?'

'Oh, I couldn't have married Lord Craybridge!' answered Nellie. 'That was different.'

'Of course it was different,' cried Margaret triumphantly; 'there was all the difference in the world between the two cases. Don't you understand that it is quite possible to feel some doubt as to whether you love a man, but that you cannot be in any doubt at all when you don't.'

Whatever this reasoning may have been worth in the abstract, Nellie had little to urge against it as applied to herself. She had had recourse to Margaret's counsel in order to be convinced, and was not disposed to criticise the shape in which conviction might be brought home to her. Nor, when once she had cast away all hesitation from her, had Philip much reason to complain of her coldness. She was not quite as demonstrative as he would have liked her to be; but she welcomed him gladly

at all hours ; she seemed to be happy in his presence, and she made a point of gratifying every whim and caprice of his with a pretty little air of submission which was the more charming to him because in all their previous intercourse she had shown herself anything but submissive.

Philip, indeed, had nothing to complain of, unless it were the reception accorded to him by his future father-in-law, which was not marked by any excess of cordiality. Mr. Brune had his own opinion of Philip, and had objections to him as a son-in-law quite apart from that of insufficiency of means. The latter, he was sure, was a strong one enough for all practical purposes, and had the advantage of being one that could be openly urged ; but Mr. Brune did not succeed in making much out of it. How is a father to prevent his daughter from marrying whom she pleases ? Mothers may do these things ; but when it comes to an ultimate trial of strength, fathers are helpless. So at least Mr. Brune averred, with a sigh and a shrug of the shoulders. Did he or did he not wish that his daughter should be happy ? Margaret desired to be informed ; and when he replied that the prospect of her marrying Philip was objectionable to him precisely because he doubted whether it would conduce to her happiness,

Mrs. Stanniforth asked him, with compassionate disdain, whether he really supposed that he was the best judge of that.

'I had had the effrontery to form some such idea,' Mr. Brune replied meekly; 'but no doubt it is better to yield before one has been ignominiously defeated than after. Have your own way; and then, when all manner of trouble comes of it, blame me. One condition I do, however, feel myself strong enough to stand out for. There shall be no marriage until Philip can show me that he is in receipt of a reasonable income, and one that is likely to be permanent.'

If Mr. Brune carried his point in this particular, it was perhaps less owing to his firmness than to the fact that he had no great amount of opposition to contend against as regarded it. Mrs. Stanniforth would have liked to see the young couple united forthwith, and hinted that the means to provide them with a modest home should not be lacking; but both Philip and Nellie displayed a commendable prudence in the matter, and declared that it would never do for them to start upon an income of nothing a year. They were both young, they observed; they had all their lives before them, and they were very well satisfied with the existing state of things. Philip added that he was determined

not to be a burden upon dear old Meg any longer than he could help.

‘A most becoming sentiment,’ said Mr. Brune, when this speech was duly reported to him by Margaret; ‘and if he postpones his wedding until he is quite independent, it is probable that I shall no longer be here to mar the ceremony by acting the part of wet blanket. Meanwhile I must trust to the chapter of accidents. In two years’ time—I think you said it would take Philip two years to become a millionaire—many things may happen. The poor fellow may die, or he may elope with a pretty actress, or——’

‘I wish you would not talk like that,’ interrupted Margaret; ‘you know you don’t mean what you say.’

‘My dear Mrs. Stanniforth, I am like the Barber of Seville; I laugh because I don’t want to do the other thing. And we know that life is uncertain, and actresses are often fascinating. By the way, Philip was saying something the other day about going to Italy to perfect his voice. What an excellent plan that would be! He must study somewhere of course, and Italy would be in so many ways preferable to London.’

‘I suppose it would,’ said Margaret thoughtfully.

‘Oh, I don’t think there can be a doubt of it. Florence, now, is a good place—especially in winter. There is a nice bracing *tramontana* there which blows down from the Apennines, and which has been found very effective in many cases, I believe. But then, again, much might be hoped for from the sanitary arrangements at Naples. At both places there should be an ample supply of beauteous *ballerine*, and others. Now I do trust, my dear Mrs. Stanforth, that you will urge him to lose no time in becoming acquainted with the land of his birth. Ah, dear me!—and to think that, but for you, he might have been living a contented and picturesque life there at this moment as a strolling player, or a brigand, or an *improvisatore*, or something of that kind.’

Margaret did not like to hear Mr. Brune make such speeches as this, but she consoled herself by reflecting that it was only his way. After all, he was tractable enough as regarded essential points, and a great deal less severe than her mother.

Mrs. Winnington, when told of the engagement, observed that it was no affair of hers, and that she should abstain from making any comment whatever upon it; but, just as a matter of curiosity, she would be glad to know one thing: upon what—or perhaps she ought

rather to say upon whom—did this precious pair propose to live?

Margaret, with a rather guilty air, replied that Philip had at least as good a chance of succeeding in his profession as other young men.

‘Oh! I was not aware that he had a profession,’ returned her mother. And as Margaret judged it best to make no rejoinder, and to go on stitching silently at a gorgeous chasuble destined eventually to adorn the back of the rector of the parish, Mrs. Winnington was compelled, after a time, to recur to the subject uninvited.

‘Dear Margaret,’ said she, ‘you know how very seldom I allow myself to interfere with you in any way. I see many foolish things done from the best motives; I see you imposed upon constantly—I might almost say every hour; but I hold my tongue. It is not always easy; but I think it is right—I *hope* it is right. Let me just for once break through my rule, and ask you whether you have considered what you are doing in encouraging this wild scheme. Surely you must see that these two and their family—for of course they will have a family, and an enormous one; people without a sixpence always do—you must see that they will be dependent wholly and solely upon your

charity. Now, is that desirable? Is it even practicable? By stinting yourself and your own—ahem!—by stinting yourself you may, and I have no doubt you will, manage to give them every luxury so long as you live; but we must look at contingencies, and we must remember at your death you will be able to leave them next to nothing; and what will come then? Penury—starvation—the workhouse!’ Mrs. Winnington’s voice and gestures as she drew this prophetic outline were quite dramatic. ‘As I said before,’ she resumed, ‘I shall not interfere, nor shall I offer any comment; but of all the barefaced piracies that I have seen practised upon you yet, this does strike me as——’

‘You don’t understand, mother,’ broke in Margaret in her quiet voice. ‘Philip would not allow me to support him, even if I were able and willing to do so; and Mr. Brune expressly stipulated for a long engagement in order to avoid any risk of the kind you mention.’

But Mrs. Winnington’s only reply took the form of a sound resembling the snorting of a dog at a closed door. Such transparent professions were not likely to deceive her. Mrs. Winnington knew the world, and was not so simple as to believe that it contained any sincere or conscientious people, except herself.

Margaret, for her part, had not expected much sympathy from her mother, whose watchful care of her interests appeared to her very natural and excusable; but at the same time it was disheartening to meet with opposition from all sides, and she began to wonder whether Hugh would show himself less prejudiced than others. Upon the whole this seemed so improbable that she resolved to write nothing to him upon the subject as yet.

The dialogue just recorded had one remarkable result, in that it caused Margaret to do a thing which she had not done before in the course of close upon a dozen years of patient forbearance—namely, to lose her temper with Mrs. Prosser. Mrs. Prosser, it must be confessed, was enough to try the patience of any mistress, and to drive a harassed one out of all power of self-control. She was always in the right, but she was not contented with that, unless she could respectfully prove somebody else to be in the wrong; she always got her own way; but in order to derive any satisfaction from doing so she was compelled artfully to stir up and overcome some preliminary opposition. She had received a great deal of kindness, first and last, from Margaret, for whom she had conceived a proportionately strong dislike. It was Mrs. Prosser's custom to present

herself for what she was facetiously pleased to call her orders in the dining-room every morning; and on this particular morning it was evident that she had brought an exhilarating grievance with her.

‘Well, Prosser, what is it now?’ asked Margaret resignedly, perceiving, from several familiar signs, what was in store for her.

‘I beg your pardon, ma’am!’ said Mrs. Prosser, with a face expressing many deferential notes of interrogation.

‘You have got something to complain of, and I am rather in a hurry. Please say what it is at once, and let us get it over.’

‘Oh, it’s of no consequence, ma’am, not if it was to put you out so. There is a matter which I should feel it my duty for to mention it to you; but I should prefer to wait till to-morrow, rather than to annoy you.’

‘I will hear it to-day, please.’

‘Eight-and-forty years have I lived in this house, girl and woman——’

‘Oh, Prosser, I know all that,’ interrupted Margaret with a short, vexed laugh. ‘Do come to the point.’

‘And never till now was I asked to sit down to my meals with a Dissenter. Neither of my poor masters that’s gone was what you could call a bigot; but——’

‘By all accounts, they were anything but that,’ struck in Margaret, who usually allowed such references to pass without comment, but whose nerves were now in a state of unwonted irritation. ‘I suppose it is the new housemaid who has offended you. Well, you may be reassured. She is a Churchwoman, and she told me so when I engaged her.’

‘Ah, just so, ma’am. She were engaged without my knowledge, or perhaps a few more inquiries would have been made. But to church she have not been, and it did come to my ears that her parents was Anabusters.’

‘Were *what*? I suppose you mean Anabaptists.’

‘Very likely, ma’am,’ answered Mrs. Prosser, with a faint superior smile; ‘I have never troubled myself to learn the names of such persuasions. The girl answered me very short and disrespectful when I put a few questions to her, and I give her to understand that she had best look out for another situation.’

‘You know perfectly well, Prosser, that I never allow you to dismiss servants. I had a very good character with this girl, and I am not going to send her away because her parents are Dissenters—if they are Dissenters.’

Mrs. Prosser’s face grew very dark. ‘You’ll excuse of me mentioning it, ma’am,’ said she

with cold dignity ; 'but I don't think this is what Mr. Langley would approve.'

It was at this point that Margaret lost her temper. 'Prosser,' she exclaimed, 'your impertinence is past all bearing! I cannot submit to be dictated to in this way either by you or by Mr. Langley. The truth is that I have given way to you a great deal too much, and now you forget yourself. Be so good as to understand, once for all, that I intend to be mistress in my own house.'

'Certainly, ma'am ; and I'm glad to hear that such is your intentions,' replied Mrs. Prosser meaningly. 'But if all authority is to be took out of my hands, it will be an impossibility for me to discharge my duties to your satisfaction, let alone my own. I feel that I didn't ought for to accept such a position, ma'am—though I shall be pleased to remain with you till you are suited.'

Margaret did not attach much importance to this threat of resignation, which had been uttered many times before, and which she knew was not meant to be taken seriously ; but she was dissatisfied with herself for having been betrayed into so much warmth of language, and, besides this, she was very much afraid that the offending housemaid would have to go in the long run, after all. There is no disguising the

fact that Margaret's character was a weak one, and she herself was painfully aware of it.

'It is most humiliating to be such a poor creature; but I am afraid I am too old to reform now,' she said later in the day to Philip, whom she had informed of this domestic broil, and who laughed unmercifully at her.

'You make mountains out of molehills, Meg,' said he, 'and troubles out of blessings. What could be a greater blessing to you than that old Prosser should take herself off? But she won't take herself off. Perhaps, if you are very good, she won't even ask you to beg her pardon. I'll have a talk with her, and make it all right. Dear me, what a lucky thing it is that we are not all like you! If I had been, I should have worried myself into my grave long ago.'

There was assuredly no fear of Philip's life being shortened by worry. Young though he was, he had had troubles of the kind which trace wrinkles upon most men's faces; but they had left no more upon his than a passing gust of wind leaves upon the smooth surface of a lake. It was barely two months since Fanny had predicted that he would marry Nellie Brune, and but little more than a month since she had been laid in her grave, and prediction and propheticess were alike to all intents and purposes forgotten by Philip. He did not forget Fanny in a literal

sense ; he thought of her sometimes, but only when he could not help it. For it always made him sad to think of her : not with a dreamy, pathetic sadness, which he would have rather enjoyed ; but with a sharp, twingeing pain, unpleasantly suggestive of a guilty conscience. This, he told himself, was absurd. It was a morbid feeling which ought not to be encouraged ; and it must be owned he was very successful in his efforts to subdue it. Altogether, there was probably not, at this time, a more light-hearted creature in the whole county than Philip Marescalchi. His past life contained a great secret which might be divulged at any moment, and which, if divulged, would almost certainly alienate from him the affection of the girl whom he loved ; he owed some thousands of pounds to a woman whom he half suspected of being in love with him and whom he did not in the least see his way to repay ; his future career was as speculative and shadowy as anything could well be ; but none of these things weighed upon his mind. With his present life he was entirely satisfied. The weather was perfection ; so was the fresh country air ; and so, above all, was Nellie.

In the latter he discovered fresh attractions every day. One of the most delightful things about her was that he did not quite understand

her ; and she was so prettily impatient when she was not understood. She was not particularly clever or witty, or well-informed ; but she had decided and original ways of looking at common things which would, he felt sure, render her the most charming companion for life that a man could wish for. He was with her now every day, and almost all day, and she never wearied him. He sauntered over to Broom Leas to meet her, as soon as he had left Margaret, and made for a certain spot in the orchard where she had told him that she would be. He caught sight of her from afar, as she stood under an apple-tree, reading a letter, and, stealing up softly behind her over the long grass, suddenly laid a hand upon each of her shoulders.

She started violently, and exclaimed, with a stamp of her little foot, ‘ Oh, I wish you would not do that ! If you only knew how I *hate* people who make me jump ! ’

‘ Is that the way to speak to your future husband ? ’ demanded Philip gravely. ‘ And, oh, Nellie, what are you stuffing into your pocket in that guilty and utterly futile way ? Don’t you know that love-letters ought always to be read within four walls, or else boldly flourished in the face of the world ? ’

‘ It isn’t a love-letter,’ answered Nellie, looking a little alarmed ; ‘ it’s only from

Walter, and—you can see it, Philip, if you like ; but——’

‘ But it wouldn’t increase my vanity if I did ; isn’t that what you mean ? Walter disapproves ; and between you and me, Nellie, I don’t wonder at it. Walter, you see, knows me a great deal better than you do. I don’t want to see his letter, because I can tell you exactly what he says without looking at it. “ Philip has no business to think about marrying at all. He is a pauper, and he is so confoundedly lazy that he will never be anything else. Added to which he is not a tenth part good enough for you ; and he has many small vices, such as flirting with other men’s wives, and leaving his bills unpaid, and playing cards on Sunday,” &c. The worst of it is that it’s true, too.’

Nellie laughed. ‘ You are quite wrong,’ she answered ; ‘ he doesn’t say anything of the kind ; but he thinks long engagements are a mistake, and he is afraid you are rather too sanguine about making your fortune. Walter is very practical, you know ; he always was so, and I think the atmosphere of the City is having its effect upon him. How I wish he would give up that horrid bank ! I don’t in the least believe that Uncle William will push him on. Walter says he is an odious old man ; but he dines with him once a week, and I have a sort of

lingering hope that, as the old fellow has quarrelled with all his other relations, he may make Walter his heir out of spite to them.'

'Poor old Walter !' said Philip compassionately. He guessed, from the haste with which Nellie had led the conversation away from the letter, that it contained expressions not very complimentary to himself; but he bore no malice. For a long time he had felt himself to be superior to Walter, and a sense of superiority engenders pity, which, as we know, is akin to love. It is not altogether true that the world delights in kicking those who are down. The world would dearly love to kick those who are up, if it dared, and even does so after a surreptitious fashion. To be successful is to insult your fellow-creatures; but to fail is to administer a delicate compliment to their vanity, and to establish a large claim upon their indulgence. —Only give people the right to speak of you as 'poor So-and-So,' and you will never lack friends.

Now Walter might certainly be considered a failure. He had failed in love, and to all appearance he had failed also in life, having sunk from the position of a country gentleman to that of a banker's clerk. Philip forgave him from his heart, and the more readily inasmuch as he did not believe it to be in Walter's power to do him the smallest injury. If there were some things

in Nellie which he did not understand, he understood at least this much, that when once she had put her hand to the plough she might be counted upon not to look back.

He passed his arm through hers, and they moved slowly away to the highest point of the orchard, whence the woods of Longbourne could be seen beyond fields and pastures. Just then the branches of the trees, which had hardly yet assumed their green summer garb, showed black and clear against the glow of the sunset ; long shafts of light, streaming through them, lay across the meadows and fell upon little glistening pools. In the still evening air the tinkling of Mr. Langley's church bell, a mile and a half away, sounded close at hand.

'How beautiful and peaceful it is !' said Nellie. 'I don't wonder at your being glad to come down here again after all that time in London. I am sure I could never bear to live in a great city. Doesn't this seem like Arcadia to you ?'

The phrase suggested memories to Philip which were not wholly pleasing. 'Arcadia would be a slow sort of place to live in, I should think,' he said ; 'as slow as Bœotia. Both countries might be very well in spring and summer time, but what would they be when the leaves were off the trees and all the nymphs and dryads were hybernating ? You are really not made for a

country life, Nellie, whatever you may say ; and when you have once become accustomed to London you will feel as if you were only half alive away from it. I suppose we shall live in London ; but then, you know, we shall be always travelling about—to Paris and St. Petersburg and Madrid, and I don't know where else—according to my engagements. I dare say we shall be abroad as much as in England.'

'Oh, I was not thinking about that,' answered Nellie hastily ; 'that will not be for a great many years ; we needn't trouble about it.'

'Well, I don't know about a great many. Two years—three years perhaps.'

'Oh, I should think it will be at least five. You will not be able to appear on the stage at all, you know, for two or three years. You said so the other day. I wonder what opera you will make your *début* in. I think I should like it to be *Faust*, because the dresses are so pretty, and you know you are fond of pretty dresses. Tell me about all the operas that there are. I have only seen three in my life.'

The opera and the lustre destined to be reflected upon it by Mr. Marescalchi took up a somewhat undue share of the conversation of these lovers. It was Nellie who usually brought forward the subject ; but it was not in any way objected to by Philip, who could talk contentedly

about himself for a considerable length of time, provided that he was listened to with proper interest. He talked about himself now until it was time for him to go, and apologised to Nellie, as he said good-night, for having wearied her with his egotism. But she answered quite truthfully that he had not wearied her at all; and indeed every one must have noticed that egotists are not always bores, though bores are always egotists.

Philip, not at all suspecting himself of being either the one or the other, started on his homeward way, whistling softly as he went, and was amused to see a stout figure, arrayed in black silk, stationed outside the rectory gates, and evidently waiting for him.

‘Old Prosser has got into a funk this time,’ thought he, ‘and is going to ask me to intercede for her. Shall I do Meg a good turn, and make the old sinner eat humble pie? I think I will.’

Mrs. Prosser dropped a curtsey, and said ‘Good evening, sir.’

‘Well, Mrs. Prosser—been to confession? It won’t do, I’m afraid. Your priest may forgive you, but your mistress never will. Why are you such a cross-grained, cantankerous old woman? You can’t expect people to go on having patience with you for ever.’

Philip had always been a favourite with Mrs.

Prosser. Her hard features contorted themselves into something that was meant to do duty for a smile as she answered, 'Oh, I am well aware, sir, that if me and Mrs. Stanniforth has not got on as well together as could be wished, there has been faults on both sides. I hope I can forgive and forget as well as another, and I don't bear no sort of ill-feeling against Mrs. Stanniforth. But it's doubtful whether I can remain much longer in her service.'

'Don't be such a pig-headed old idiot, Mrs. Prosser. There are plenty of good housekeepers to be had for good wages; but you won't find such another place as Longbourne in a hurry.'

'I didn't say nothing about leaving Longbourne, sir,' observed Mrs. Prosser with quiet emphasis.

'Do you mean to give Mrs. Stanniforth notice to quit, then?' asked Philip, laughing. 'I believe you are capable of it.'

'Well, sir, I don't know but what I am. I have been waiting here, Mr. Philip, some little time for to take the opportunity of telling you something which weighs upon my conscience. If you would pardon the liberty, sir, I would make bold to walk as far as the house alongside of you. Being twilight, and most people gone home to their teas, you would perhaps be so kind as to overlook the freedom.'

‘Come along, Mrs. Prosser ; I should be proud to be seen by the whole parish in such respectable company.’

‘You are so kind as to say so, sir.’

Mrs. Prosser cleared her voice, and then proceeded with great solemnity : ‘What I am going to tell you, sir, has been told to no living soul, except under seal of confession, for a matter of twenty years. Twenty years have I kept silence ; but the time has come that I can’t reconcile it with my sense of right for to do so no longer. But before I say any more, sir, I must ask you to give me your word that you won’t let it go no further till I’m proved to be right or wrong.’

‘Mrs. Prosser, you may rely on my absolute discretion.’

Mrs. Prosser cast a sharp side glance at Philip. ‘’Tis no joking matter, sir,’ said she, slightly offended. ‘Mr. Brune must not know of this, nor yet Mrs. Stanniforth must not know, nor yet Miss Nellie must not know—leastways until it’s necessary that everybody should be told.’

‘Go on, Mrs. Prosser ; you excite my curiosity greatly. I’ll swear not to breathe a word to a creature till you give me leave. Will that do for you ?’

‘Thank you, sir ; that will be sufficient. I

don't know whether you ever heard tell of my old master, Mr. George Brune, sir, Mr. Neville's brother that was. He was a fine-spirited gentleman, though sing'lar in his ways, and terrible extravagant. Always a-rushing about he was, from one furrin land to another, and never could abide his own home ; though he come back there to die. "Prosser," he says to me when I went to meet him at the door, "Prosser," he says—I remember it as if 'twas yesterday—"I've come back to Longbourne to die, you see." Oh dear, oh dear ! it give me such a turn !'

'I am sure it must have been a great shock to you. Well ; and so he confided an awful family secret to you on his death-bed. I don't want to hurry you, Mrs. Prosser, but it's getting rather late.'

'I shall not detain you long, sir. As I was a-saying when you interrupted me, sir, Mr. George were always on the move, and we was never told how long he was to be away, nor when we was to expect him back. Sometimes he'd stop a month, and sometimes only a couple of days ; and once we was for two years without seeing or hearing of him. He were in Italy at that time, as I understood. Now, sir, I dessay you're aware that there's a many things which servants hear of and don't mention, and it did come to my ears, through Parsons, Mr. George's

man, that there was a lady in Italy. Parsons, he were always a very close man—been dead now—let me see—going on for fifteen years it is since Parsons died, and never told no more about it; but it did come out in the course of conversation, you understand, sir, that there were a lady. At first I thought it were one of those connections which I didn't ought to speak about nor think about; but when poor Mr. George were a-dying I changed my opinion, sir. Myster'ous, indeed, is the decrees of Providence, and His ways past finding out! Little did I think, as I listened to that poor gentleman's ravings, that I should be repeating them to you, sir, twenty years later in this park!

'Mrs. Prosser, I would not for the world spoil your climax; but I can't help seeing what is coming. I have no strawberry-mark on my left arm. And now, where is Mr. Brune's marriage certificate?'

'Reely, sir, if you fluster me so we shall never get on. If there had been any marriage certificate, do you think I should have ventured for to conceal it? I don't know nothing for certain; and what I do know must be strictly betwixt me and you, sir, if you please, for the present. I nursed poor Mr. George, night and day, through his last illness, and what he said in his delirium, it was impossible for me to shut

my eyes to it, sir. He kep' on talking very excited about a marriage, and "They can't dispute it," he says; "'twas all reg'lar," he says. And when I ask him what marriage, and where did it take place, and so forth—just to soothe him like, you understand, sir—he opens his eyes wide, and says, "Why, at Florence, you fool, and that brat's the heir." After that he didn't say no more—not to be intelligible; but once I heard him muttering, "I'm sorry for poor Neville; Neville's in the wrong box;" and once, if you'll pardon of my repeating the expression, sir, he calls out, "What a damned ass I was!" I ought to have mentioned that just before he was took so bad he made me fetch a box full of letters and burn them before his eyes. They was mostly letters written in a furrin language; but there was no envelopes, so I couldn't tell whether they was from Italy or not. And "Prosser," he says to me, "you're a faithful creature," he says, "and you'll find I've not forgot you in my will." And then he lies back on his piller, and laughs. He had a very cur'ous laugh, had Mr. George; and to be sure there was never any will found. Now, sir, you know all that I know, and you can judge whether it's your interest to look into it or not.'

'Upon my word, Mrs. Prosser,' answered Philip, who was a good deal more startled and

excited than he chose to appear, 'I don't see that it is. Have you any reason at all, beyond the fact that I was born in Italy, for supposing me to be the brat to whom your master so politely alluded ?'

'Look in the glass, sir,' replied Mrs. Prosser, 'and you will see a very good reason. How you can have lived here all these years and no one noticed that you was the moral of Mr. Neville, barring the eyes, is what I can't comprehend. But I never felt no doubt in my own mind from the very first. Moment as I heard the name of Merryskulker, I says to myself, "'Tis him!'"'

'I do not quite follow the deductive process; but it is possible that there may be something in it. I should like to know, by the way, why you have never said anything about all this before.'

'Sir,' answered Mrs. Prosser gravely, 'it have been a point of conscience with me. Were I justified, I have ask myself, in betraying things as I were never meant to hear, and as come to my knowledge almost in an unfair way, as one may say ? And then, I says to myself, What is the good ? If 'tis true, depend upon it truth will out, without my meddling ; and why am I to do an injury to the family as I owe everything to under Providence ? For, you see, sir,

you may be a Brune, or you may not; but I could never feel to you quite the same as I do to Mr. Neville.'

'Creditable, Mrs. Prosser, if a trifle casuistic. And then, I suppose, the temptation to turn Mrs. Stanniforth out of house and home was too much for you.'

'That, sir, is a speech which your poor father would have known me better than to make. No; my motives was very different. When I heard how things was with you and Miss Nellie, my dooty come more plain to me. Thinks I, Mr. Philip and Mr. Neville will settle it amicable now, as betwixt father and son; them Stanniforths can have their purchase-money back by degrees, and 't won't be so very much as will be owing to them when you take off what they got from the railway; and so no one won't suffer, and the family will come by its own again. That's what I thought, sir; and Mr. Langley, he approve cordial, and, "Better late than never," he says; though——'

'Mr. Langley! Do you mean to say that Mr. Langley has known of this all along?

'Under seal of confession, sir.'

'By Jove! Do you know, Mrs. Prosser, I am not at all sure that you and Mr. Langley have not been compounding a felony under seal of confession?'

‘Not a vestige of proof, sir, if you’ll please to recollect. Nothing but the ravings of a dying man to go by, and no names mentioned even in the course of them ravings.’

‘Very true. I dare say you have found a mare’s nest, after all.’

‘Perhaps so, sir. But I think it might be worth your while for to look into it. Florence, you will remember, sir, were the place, and the year would be 1853 or 1854. From taking one thing with another and counting back, I think as we should be safe in putting the date somewhere between March and June 1853. I questioned Parsons very hard about what they was doing that year and about the Italian lady ; but I couldn’t get no satisfaction out of him. Sometimes I thought he didn’t know so much himself as he pretended ; for Mr. George would often send him away for a week or more at a time, to order rooms or hire villas, or such like, and ’t isn’t to be supposed as he would want to acquaint Parsons with his marriage, if so be as ’twas a marriage.’

Philip took out his note-book, and wrote down ‘Florence : March to June 1853.’ But this precaution was hardly needed, for the date remained clearly before his eyes through the greater part of a restless night ; and the more

he thought over Mrs. Prosser's revelation the more he became convinced that her surmise was well founded. He had taken her advice of looking carefully in the glass while dressing for dinner, and had certainly discerned in the small, finely-cut features and the dark complexion reflected therein a decided resemblance to those of Mr. Brune. The expression was as different from his reputed uncle's as it could possibly be ; and perhaps it may have been owing to this circumstance that the likeness had never been noticed by those who were best acquainted with the two men.

CHAPTER XXIII.

PHILIP AT FLORENCE.

THERE are people who would rather admit any imputation in the world than that of being favoured by Fortune; people who, if told they are looking well, will remind you reproachfully that they had a very bad cold in the head the week before last; people who grumble at coming into a fortune because of the payment of legacy-duty entailed thereby, and who could not accept a first-class embassy or a seat in the Cabinet without sighing over the arduous duties attached to such posts. But Philip, whatever his defects may have been, was not one of those ungracious and ungrateful specimens of humanity. He had always recognised the fact that his luck was exceptional; and his first reflection, on waking out of the short sleep into which he had fallen towards morning was an acknowledgment that in the present instance, as in so many previous ones, the stars in their courses were fighting for him. Characteristically enough, he was less

struck by the strange turn of fortune which promised to change him from a penniless nobody into a highly respectable landed proprietor than by a concurrence of circumstances which seemed likely to render the task of investigation natural and easy. Of all cities in Europe Florence was the one to which he could betake himself at this time with the least fear of exciting remark or suspicion. In the ordinary course of things he would most likely have moved thither before the autumn; and latterly both Mr. Brune and Margaret had been hinting to him that he ought not to lose time in bringing the period of his musical education to an end. Herr Steinberger, too, who had not approved very cordially of the Italian plan, would probably prefer that his pupil should take leave of absence during the busy time of the London season than later in the year. He could, in short, go where he wanted to go, and at the same time tell the literal truth as to his destination—which was something of an unwonted luxury for him. He had quite made up his mind that the mystery should be solved, if by any means he could solve it; and really the solution did not seem likely to present any difficulties whatever.

After breakfast, therefore, Margaret was led out into the garden, and was informed that Philip proposed to hasten the fulfilment of his pro-

gramme by a few months. 'Everybody says that May is the time for Florence,' he remarked; 'and I suppose, if one wants to get all the good one can out of a place, one should take it at its best. That old Signora Tommasini whom I told you about will be there soon, and will give me introductions that may be useful to me. Moreover, it is high time for me to be setting to work again, Meg. Capua is very delightful, but stern duty seems to motion me towards Tuscany.'

'Capua! where is that?' asked Margaret, who had not the educational advantages enjoyed by the young women of the present day.

'It is within sight of the towers of Crayminster cathedral,' answered Philip; 'and it is a dangerous residence for lazy people who like being spoilt. It isn't everybody who appreciates it at its proper value, though. I don't believe you care a straw for this dear old place, Meg; you would go off and leave it to-morrow without a single regret.'

'Oh, no; indeed I should not!' said Margaret. 'It has taken me a great many years to get fond of Longbourne; but I am very fond of it now, and of all its associations. I leave home so seldom, too, that I have become like a limpet on a rock, and I should feel utterly lost if I were dragged off it, and thrown out into the world again.'

This was not at all the kind of reply that Philip had wished and expected to receive. He made haste to change the subject. 'By the way, Meg,' said he, 'didn't you tell me once that my father and mother were married at Florence?'

Margaret threw a quick glance of apprehension at him. 'I think so,' she answered; 'I think it was at Florence; but it is so long since I was told about it that I cannot be quite sure.'

The truth was that she was far from feeling as certain as she had once done that this marriage had ever been solemnised at all. The improbability of Countess Marescalchi's story had become more apparent to her with the lapse of years; and from the same cause sundry little touches of sincerity about the dying woman's utterances, which had carried conviction to Margaret's mind at the time, had lost distinctness. Philip had not alluded to his father or mother half a dozen times in the last ten years, and she was sorry that it should have occurred to him now to make inquiries about what might prove to be undiscoverable.

'Being in the place, I should rather like to see the church where they were married. It seems odd to know so little about one's parents,' Philip went on. 'I suppose you don't remember the name of the church, Meg?'

Margaret shook her head, and looked rather shamefaced. It struck her for the first time that she had hardly done her duty towards the unfortunate woman whose child she had appropriated. In her anxiety to treat Philip in all respects as her own son, she had forgotten a little what her wishes would have been, had she been in the situation of poor Countess Marescalchi, and had taken no pains to keep the mother alive in the memory of the *bambino* whom she had so loved.

‘I don’t think I ever heard the name of the church,’ Margaret answered. ‘Indeed, I am almost sure I never did. I am afraid I have been very selfish, Philip,’ she added penitently. ‘I ought to have talked more about your mother to you; and I am sure you must often have wanted to know about her. Why did you never ask me before?’

Philip suddenly burst out laughing, and then as suddenly checked himself, turning his head away for a moment. If there was a person in the world whom he loved, it was Margaret; he never deceived her without a greater or less degree of pain; and the contrast between the true cause of his inquiries and that to which she attributed them had flashed vividly across his mind, as his impressions always did, and had faded away, leaving the echo of

that inappropriate laugh as the trace of its passage.

‘Why do you laugh?’ asked Margaret.

‘I don’t know. I don’t believe in instinctive affection, do you? How can one really care for a person whom one hardly recollects? You are my real mother, Meg; and as for my father, I have small reason to revere his memory, by all accounts. I should like just to know who he was, though. One feels a little pardonable curiosity upon such points.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Margaret, with some hesitation; ‘but I should hope—I should think, at least—that he must be dead. I have your uncle Signor Cavestri’s address in Florence somewhere, and I can give it you, if you like. That is, I have what was his address twelve years ago: I have never heard a word of or from him since.’

‘Give me the address, Meg, and I’ll look the old fellow up. Perhaps he may know something; and, if he doesn’t, it can’t be helped.’

‘I almost hope he may not,’ said Margaret.

Philip was not prepared to go quite so far as that; but he offered the general observation that it was a queer world, to which Mrs. Stanniforth signified her assent; and with that the subject dropped.

A few days after this Philip set out for Italy, with the good wishes of all his friends to speed

him on his way. Some of them drove down to Crayminster station to bid him farewell; and the last thing that Philip saw, as the train began to move, was Nellie, waving her hand and nodding to him, with the brightest of smiles upon her face.

‘Hurray!’ exclaimed Mr. Brune, as he turned to leave the platform. ‘My dear Nellie, may I be permitted to say hurray?’

‘You may say anything you like, papa,’ answered she, with due submission.

‘Thank you, my dear. How I do dislike that young man!’

‘Ah; but you would dislike anybody who wanted to marry me, wouldn’t you?’ said Nellie, taking her father’s arm and giving it a squeeze.

‘Well, well; perhaps so. I can’t bear the sight of Marescalchi, I know. However, we’ve seen the last of him for the present, and long may it be before we see him again! It is my firm belief that you don’t care a brass farthing for him, Nell.’

And perhaps the very vehemence with which Miss Brune repelled this accusation may have confirmed her father in his opinion.

It is certain that Nellie did not shed any tears, and was in no way cast down by her lover’s departure; nor, for that matter, was the

lover himself cast down. Philip's powers of amusing and enjoying himself were quite unbounded; and the pleasure he got out of a railway journey from England to Florence was as great as the discomfort entailed thereby upon common mortals—which is saying a good deal. The odd types that he encountered among his fellow-travellers, the novelty of the scenes that flitted, like dissolving views, past the railway-carriage windows, the ever-increasing warmth of the sun and clearness of the atmosphere, as the express rushed southwards—all these, and a hundred other trifles, contributed to divert and exhilarate him. A fresh sensation awaited him after the passing of the frontier, namely, a vague and pleasant stirring of long-buried memories. Those sallow faces, those high-pitched voices, those unshaven chins, those stout and brilliantly-dressed ladies, had he not known them all in some previous state of existence? The mulberry-trees, the maize-fields, the trailing vines, the ragged beggars who loitered and whined outside the railings of wayside stations, were not all these familiar, and yet strange, to him? Even certain faint odours, in which garlic and bad tobacco had a large share, seemed to recall shadowy experiences through which somebody had once passed. Philip really could not have sworn that he had passed through

them himself. He felt half inclined to shake hands with the people who got into the railway carriage; for surely they were all old friends, though their names had somehow escaped him. He studied their features with a puzzled smile; whereupon they smiled back, as Italians are always ready to do, and promptly entered into conversation. Philip had some knowledge of Italian, and his quick ear soon picked up the intonation of that easiest of tongues: perhaps, too, memory came to his aid again here. He managed to make himself agreeable; he scraped acquaintance with various entertaining persons; and so arrived at his destination at length, not at all tired, in a very cheerful frame of mind, and without having troubled his head once in the course of his journey about its object.

But when he had established himself comfortably in an hotel overlooking the Arno, and had had a bath and an ample breakfast and a cigar, he began to think it was time to attend to business, and, strolling out into the sunshine, inquired his way to the Via di San Giorgio.

The directions that he received were not very precise, and he had some little difficulty in following them; but he was in no hurry. He spent a very agreeable hour in admiring Giotto's Campanile, in loitering down the sunny side of broad thoroughfares, in staring in at shop-

windows, and in exploring a network of narrow byways. At length, more by chance than intention, he hit off the street of which he was in search, and, drawing a slip of paper from his pocket, compared the address inscribed upon it with the number of the house before him. 'Via di San Giorgio, No. 34, *terzo piano*.' Here, sure enough, was No. 34 ; and a very dismal and poverty-stricken habitation it looked. As Philip climbed the dirty stone staircase, he had leisure to reflect that an uncle who lived in such quarters would be a very likely sort of uncle to make demands upon the purse of a nephew possessed of landed property ; but parsimony had never been one of Philip's vices, and he said to himself that, if things turned out well, some sort of provision should be made for this needy relative. It presently appeared, however, that Signor Cavestri was no longer in a position to request or require human aid.

'Signor Cavestri !' cried the dishevelled servant-of-all-work who answered Philip's ring. 'Eh ! signore.' And she raised her right hand and suddenly allowed her head to drop upon it sideways, as if it would roll off her shoulders.

Philip had never seen this gesture employed before ; but its meaning required no explanation. 'Do you mean to say that Signor Cavestri is dead ?' he asked in some dismay.

‘*È morto—è morto—sì!*’ answered the woman, nodding a great many times, in apparent determination that there should be no mistake as to the fact of her late master’s demise; and she went on to state that it was three years and more since he had been laid to rest, and to give some particulars of his last illness, to which Philip paid little attention.

‘What a bother!’ he muttered. Then he said aloud: ‘I regret this exceedingly. I have come all the way from England to see Signor Cavestri upon a matter of business which I had hoped might prove advantageous to him. Do you know whether any relations of his are living in Florence?’

‘*Sicuro!* His daughter, the Signora Bonera, and her family inhabit the floor upon which your Excellency is standing,’ replied the woman, upon whom Philip’s well-to-do appearance had not failed to produce some effect. ‘With permission, I will go and call the signora.’

But, before Philip could make any answer, a third person had come to the front, in the shape of an obese, dark-haired lady in a rather dirty white dressing-gown, who may perhaps have overheard the previous colloquy.

‘I am the Signora Bonera,’ quoth she, with a sweeping curtesy and a fascinating smile. ‘*Favorisca, signore.*’ And she led the way into

a scantily-furnished and carpetless sitting-room, and requested the stranger to do her the honour to sit down.

‘So you are my cousin!’ thought Philip, as he seated himself with precaution upon a decrepit arm-chair; ‘and you have got a family, and be hanged to you! All things considered, my dear cousin, I shall not reveal my identity to you until I am obliged.’

He therefore made known the nature of his errand with much circumlocution and a great deal of pretended difficulty in expressing himself in Italian. Signora Bonera became immensely interested and excited when she heard what it was that had brought the stranger to Florence; she was very inquisitive and asked numberless questions; but the greater part of these Philip affected not to understand. He soon found out that she was not likely to be of any assistance to him, and that she knew little or nothing beyond the fact that her aunt had been married to a wealthy Englishman, who had deserted her.

‘But,’ said she, ‘my uncle Filippo, who lives at Bologna, would be able to furnish you with every particular. He was at the marriage himself, as I have often heard him tell, and he can prove, if that is what is wanted, that it was a good marriage. I will write to him this even-

ing, and beg him to come here and meet you. *Lo zio* is growing an old man—and there is the cost of the journey. But doubtless the signore has the means——’

An expressive pause seemed to call for some rejoinder from Philip, who bowed and said there would be no difficulty on the score of legitimate expenses.

‘I will write by the very next post,’ cried the Signora Bonera. ‘And what name shall I have the pleasure of mentioning to my uncle?’ she asked insinuatingly.

Philip declared that he could not think of putting the lady to so much trouble. Only let her oblige him with Signor Filippo Cavestri’s address, and he would himself undertake the rest. This proposition did not at all meet the views of Signora Bonera, who pointed out that it would be a great deal easier for her than for her interlocutor to compose an Italian letter; but Philip said he had no doubt he should be able to make himself intelligible with the help of a dictionary. Thereupon a long and lively debate ensued; but in the end Philip carried his point, and escaped without having given his name. He promised to call again before long, at the same time throwing out some pacifying hints as to a possible change in the fortunes of the Cavestri family, and so made his way out into

the air and sunshine again, not ill pleased, upon the whole, with the result of his afternoon's work. It would have been more convenient, and probably less expensive, to have had to deal with one person than with a whole family, and he could have wished that his cousin had been a rather more presentable individual; still, he reflected, it might have been worse. These people were evidently too poor to be very troublesome, and it was a far cry from Longbourne to Florence. Taking everything into consideration, he was inclined to put down the whole Cavestri clan at an annual expenditure of from three to four hundred pounds; and really they would be cheap at the money, if they could supply him with the information that he wanted.

When he returned to his hotel the sun, sloping towards the west, was flooding the Lung Arno with mellow light, and illumining, among other persons and things, a very smart landau, which was waiting at the door. Philip was indulging in a moment's idle curiosity as to who the owner of this showy equipage might be, when the porter hurried out, cap in hand, to hold open the door. Then came the swish of voluminous skirts; a shrill exclamation rang through Philip's head, and immediately both his hands were being grasped in the tightly-gloved ones of Signora Tommasini.

‘You, of all people in the world!’ she exclaimed. ‘Well, I am glad! I had really begun to think I was never to see you again.’

‘Nor your 5,000*l.* either,’ thought Philip. And simultaneously it occurred to him that, if he should indeed prove to be the heir of Longbourne, this and other debts might be discharged within no very long space of time. This enabled him to welcome Signora Tommasini with less of mental reserve than he might otherwise have done.

‘You can’t be more glad than I am,’ he answered. ‘You are more surprised, I dare say, because I fully expected to meet you here, and have been looking forward to doing so for a long time.’

‘Have you? I don’t believe you a bit; but it is polite of you to say that. Why have you never written to me? Are you staying in this hotel? Are you really going to study here?’ went on the Signora, asking questions with her usual volubility, and pausing for no answers. ‘Come for a drive with me. I am going to the Cascine, where it is delicious at this hour, and where you will meet all the world. I am singing at the Opera here, you know, and am received *tant bien que mal*. But I don’t like these Florentines; they are very different from my good English public. They are cold; they are

critical ; they make no allowance for a poor old woman with a cracked voice, who is doing her best to please them. Ah, well, every dog has his day. The Florentines would adore you ; they love a handsome face as much as a sweet voice. You ought to make your *début* here. But I suppose old Steinberger would object to that. Not that you would ever be able to make yourself heard beyond such an orchestra. The public taste is becoming ruined in Italy, as it is everywhere else. In old days they loved singing ; now they only care for noise. I was singing in *Don Carlos* last night, and they insisted on having the march three times, the idiots ! All that is rather a help to old stagers, like myself, who don't mind a hubbub which covers deficiencies ; but it would be fatal to you. Where have you been since you left London ? Down in the country all this time ? I thought you hated the country. Give an account of yourself and of all that you have been doing.'

'I will, if you'll let me get in a word,' answered Philip, laughing.

He had been seated in the landau beside Signora Tommasini long before this, and they were within the gates of the Cascine by the time that she had ceased speaking. The carriage had fallen into a line of others, which were proceeding at a snail's pace along the shady

drive, meeting a stream of returning vehicles, some shabby, some resplendent, all, or nearly all, badly horsed. Many hats were raised and many hands waved to the popular *prima donna*, who acknowledged these greetings with a bow from her waist to the ladies, a bob of her head for the men, and a broad, good-humoured smile for everybody. Her time was so taken up with receiving and returning salutations that she could pay but little attention to her companion, and at last ordered the coachman to drive on to a more secluded part of the gardens.

‘It is impossible to talk or to listen in this crowd,’ said she; ‘and I want to talk to you, or rather to hear you talk.’ And when the fashionable world of Florence had been left behind, the Signora proposed that they should get out of the carriage and walk a little way. ‘I am obliged to take some exercise every day to keep down my fat,’ she said, with a laugh. ‘I haven’t succeeded very well, you’ll say; but then there’s no telling how much worse I might have been if I had been lazy. Now, what has brought you here? Wasn’t it rather a sudden resolution?’

‘I always talked, you know, of coming to Italy for a time,’ answered Philip; ‘and it so happens that I have reasons for wishing to be in Florence just now, besides the desire to take a

few lessons and to enjoy the pleasure of your society.'

At that moment he felt a strong impulse to be candid with Signora Tommasini. Philip, like many other persons who habitually distrust their kind, was subject to irresistible leanings towards confidence in the case of certain individuals, and particularly of such as he thought likely to prove of service to him. Signora Tommasini was emphatically one of these. He knew that her affection for him was sincere; he had found her also to be a shrewder woman than was generally supposed, and he had a notion that shrewdness might be a very necessary quality in dealings with the Cavestri family. Added to this, he was naturally anxious to let the Signora know that there was so fair a probability of her 5,000*l.* being handed back to her before she was much older. Such being his state of mind, it may well be supposed that within the space of about half an hour the Signora knew all that there was to know about her friend's parentage and adoption, and about the flattering tale which Hope and Mrs. Prosser had whispered in his ear. She would have been in possession of the facts a great deal sooner if she had not interrupted the beginning of the recital by many queries and ejaculations, and if she had not stopped Philip to scold him

roundly for five minutes when he alluded to the prospect of his being able soon to refund the advance which she had so kindly made to him. But after that she became more and more grave and silent, and her final comment upon what she had heard was the unexpected one of 'Well, it is a great pity.'

Philip looked at her, looked up at the sky, looked around him at the trees on either side of the shady alley along which they were pacing, and, spreading out his hands with a gesture of patient expostulation, addressed himself to space. 'Now, did you ever—I ask you, *did* you ever—hear anything like that? I have seen something of women; I have lived amongst them more than most men do, and I flattered myself that I understood the queer nature of them to some extent; but after this I give the subject up, it beats me altogether. Oh, it's Balak and Balaam over again, you know. I bring her out here to congratulate me, and behold, she puts on a long face, and says it's a pity! Now, I should like to know why it is a pity. In what possible way can it be a pity?'

'It seems to me,' answered the Signora, 'that it is a pity in every way. The story will turn out to be true, I'm afraid; and I tell you frankly that I'm very sorry for it. I had had great hopes of you. With labour and patience I

do believe that you would have become a famous singer some day ; and I am quite certain that the life of a famous singer would have been the one above all others to make you happy. You will not be happy at all as a country gentleman with a limited income, and you will go to the bad, most likely, for want of something to do and somebody to look after you. More than that, I think it is a pity—we are friends, you know, and you mustn't be angry if I speak my mind—I think it is a pity that you should be turning the lady who has been the making of you out of house and home.'

Philip was not easily offended ; but this outspoken censure touched him in a sore place, and the blood mounted to his forehead as he answered, 'That is a very unfair way of putting it. It is true that Mrs. Stanniforth may have to leave Longbourne ; but is that any fault of mine? She won't be a penny the poorer, remember, and all that she will lose will be the house. And let me tell you that, if you knew her, you would be aware that she is the very last person in the world to grudge me a piece of good fortune.'

'Then why didn't you tell her what you were coming here for?'

'What would have been the use of troubling her, when I knew nothing for certain? Besides,

I promised Prosser that I wouldn't say a word to any one.'

'I don't care a snap for that malignant old hag of a housekeeper; and you don't care a snap for your promise. You have broken it already in telling me; break it again, and write to Mrs. Stanniforth by to-night's mail.'

'My dear Signora Tommasini, I have the most sincere respect for your opinion; but I do think I may be the best judge of what ought to be my conduct towards Mrs. Stanniforth.'

'Well may you say that you don't understand women!' cried the Signora with some impatience. 'Oh, you foolish fellow! can't you understand such a simple thing as this?—that Mrs. Stanniforth would forgive you for turning her out of her home, or even for taking her purse out of her pocket; but that she will never quite forgive you for deceiving her. You have made a very stupid mistake as it is; but you may undo it partly, if you write by to-night's post and explain everything. She will think you found writing more easy than speaking; many people do. Come along back to the carriage; we haven't a minute to lose.'

And this energetic lady caught Philip by the arm, and hurried him away, paying no heed to his protests.

'You are quite wrong,' he said. 'She'll tell

her mother, and then there'll be the deuce to pay. And a pretty fool I shall look if the whole thing turns out a myth.'

'Stuff and nonsense!' returned the Signora; 'she won't tell anybody; and if she does, it is better to look like a fool than like something else. Don't you play fast and loose with your best friends. You can't afford it, I tell you.'

All the way back to Florence the Signora lectured and Philip argued; but the end of it was that he did write the letter, as he was bid, and posted it at the same time with one addressed to Signor Cavestri at Bologna.

CHAPTER XXIV.

LETTERS AND TELEGRAMS.

THE Post Office, as brought to its present state of efficiency, is doubtless one of the glories of the age and an institution for which everybody ought to be thankful. That the facilities for speedy communication afforded by it give us all an immensity of needless worry is, however, indisputable; and this chapter will show how a mighty pothole was brought about among one set of insignificant people by the postal machinery during the space of a single short week.

Possibly things might have fallen out differently but for the accident of Philip's having chosen to leave Longbourne for Italy on a Monday; which was the day invariably set apart by Mrs. Stanniforth for the despatch of that weekly budget to Shorncliffe which has been already more than once referred to. For several past Mondays Margaret had contrived, with no small difficulty, to keep her own counsel upon the subject which chiefly engrossed her

thoughts; for she had felt certain that Hugh would consider the engagement between Philip and Nellie an imprudent one, and would say so; and she had heard this said so many times already that it seemed almost better to hold her peace altogether than to expose herself to a repetition of it from a fresh quarter. But on this especial Monday, when all the agitation of leave-taking was still upon her, it was inevitable that she should write about Philip, and scarcely less inevitable that, in writing about him, she should tell the whole truth. This was the conclusion to which she came, after tearing up three abortive attempts at mystery. Either she must disburden her soul, or Hugh must do without his letter. Her own inclinations and regard for the feelings of her friend alike urged her to adopt the former alternative; and accordingly she did adopt it—with a result which will have been foreseen by readers with good memories.

On the Wednesday morning Mrs. Winnington, sitting opposite to her daughter at the breakfast-table, and receiving a pat of butter in her tea, instead of a lump of sugar, formed the not unnatural conclusion that some news of a disquieting nature had reached the mistress of the house.

‘Dearest Margaret,’ said she, when the above trifling mistake had been mentioned and recti-

fied, 'I trust you have not had any unpleasant letters.'

'Nearly all letters are unpleasant,' answered Margaret, with a tremble in her voice and a very unsuccessful imitation of a laugh. She added something incoherent about business letters and begging letters, and laid down the one which she had been perusing.

But as soon as her mother, who had a fine healthy appetite, had ceased to scrutinise her, she picked it up again and finished it, her face growing paler and paler, as she read.

'MY DEAR MARGARET,' (Hugh wrote),
'I can't tell you how astonished and grieved I was to hear by your letter of this morning that Marescalchi had engaged himself to Miss Brune. It is such a bad business that I hardly know how to tell you what is the real state of the case; and yet it is certain that you must be told. I wish with all my heart that I had not been such a fool as to conceal what I have known for the last three months; but I acted, as I thought, for the best, never doubting but that the young fellow would confess it all to you himself, sooner or later. Latterly, indeed, I have fancied, from your never saying anything about him in your letters, that he had done so.

'It is useless to try and break these things gently: the miserable truth is that he is married

already. Unfortunately, there is no room for the shadow of a doubt as to the fact. You may remember that you wrote to me in January last, asking me to go up to London and see Marescalchi, who, you feared, was in some trouble; and it was then that I discovered that he was living in Conduit Street with his wife, to whom he must have been some time married, as there was a baby. I happened to see the whole three of them entering the house, and I am bound to say the young woman appeared to be a modest, respectable sort of person, though certainly not a lady. I hesitated to speak to Marescalchi at the time, as perhaps I ought to have done; and when I was next able to call, I heard from the landlady of the lodgings that he and Mrs. Marescalchi were in great distress, owing to the sudden death of the child; so that it was really impossible for me to intrude upon him. Had I had the smallest idea that he could be such a scoundrel as he evidently is, I should not have been so scrupulous. I need not say how much I have felt for you all this time; and I may add that I have also wasted some good pity upon him. Poor little Miss Brune! this is a sad beginning for her life.

‘If I can be of any help to you in any way, you know that you can command me. I could get leave, if necessary, and a *journey to Italy*

would be quite within my power. I dread to seem interfering and officious ; but there are emergencies in which a strong arm is a useful thing, and there are persons who understand no other argument.

‘I am writing in some haste ; and, besides that, I thought you would rather I said what I had to say as briefly as possible ; but, of course, if you wish it, I can give you fuller particulars. For the present I will only add that, if you can think of any way in which I can serve you, and will tell me of it, you will confer a true kindness upon

‘Your affectionate friend,

‘HUGH KENYON.’

There were certain passages in this letter which were scarcely judicious, and the whole composition was pervaded by a subdued ‘didn’t-I-tell-you-so?’ flavour which Margaret would certainly have noticed and resented, had its subject-matter been less appalling. As it was, she could only repeat to herself, ‘This is not true. I can’t believe it. Hugh must have made some mistake.’ But there was very little comfort to be got out of telling herself that she couldn’t believe it, when she knew all the time that she could, and did. She read the letter over again, and was unable to discover any loophole for

escape. There was no getting over the landlady's allusion to 'Mrs. Marescalchi;' nor was it conceivable that Philip should have allowed any woman to pass as his wife, unless he had been really married to her. Margaret did not ask herself whether it was conceivable that Philip should contemplate bigamy. She had not yet had time to weigh probabilities, and was so stunned and bewildered that, if Mrs. Winnington had chosen to question her further, the whole story must infallibly have come out in the course of a few minutes.

It chanced, however, that Mrs. Winnington's mind was engaged with other matters at the moment. Mrs. Winnington had been reading letters of her own—letters from London—letters in which mention was made of balls and dinners and State concerts, and all the other unvarying incidents of that life for which her soul yearned. Mrs. Winnington had tasted these delights many a time and often, and for her assuredly there could be no new thing under the dim London sun; but, as she was very far from desiring anything new, such philosophical reflections were powerless to console her, and it was with a profound and pathetic sigh that she restored her letters to their envelopes. Margaret did not appear to notice this signal of distress; so Mrs. Winnington sighed more loudly, and, again

failing to attract attention, rose, walked to the other end of the table, and placing her hands affectionately on her daughter's shoulders, kissed her on the forehead.

‘Dearest Margaret,’ said she, ‘you are looking very pale. Don’t you think you ought to have a little change?’

‘Oh, no,’ answered Margaret, hastily; ‘I am perfectly well, and I hate going away from home. Longbourne suits me better than any other place in the world.’

‘My dear, are you sure of that? Constitutions differ, certainly; but I cannot help thinking it very unlikely that a place which invariably makes me ill after three weeks can agree with you all the year round.’

‘But it really does,’ answered Margaret, with provoking obtuseness.

Mrs. Winnington moved to the window, and looked out upon the terrace, where her younger daughter was to be seen walking up and down in the sunshine. ‘Poor Edith!’ she murmured; ‘I do feel so very sorry for her, poor child!’

‘Sorry for Edith?’ repeated Margaret, absently. ‘Why should you be sorry for her?’

‘Oh, my dear,’ cried Mrs. Winnington, with some asperity, ‘you are not the only person in the world who is to be pitied. Other people

have their troubles too; and naturally, at Edith's age, it seems hard to be buried down in the country, when all her friends are enjoying themselves in town.'

This direct appeal proved effectual. Margaret roused herself, got up, and joined her mother at the window. 'How selfish of me never to have thought of that!' she exclaimed penitently. 'Of course she ought to be in London, and so ought you. Do take her there at once; you must not hesitate about leaving me.'

But Mrs. Winnington shook her head. 'No,' said she decisively; 'I determined, once for all, last year, that I never would spend another season in London lodgings. To begin with, it is more than I can afford.'

'But, mother——'

'Dearest Margaret, you are always so kind: and I know you would gladly help us out with our rent; but rent is really the least thing. There are carriages, and dresses, and flowers, and a hundred other necessities, which would swallow up the whole of my wretched little income in a few months. Besides which, living in lodgings is objectionable in every way. I felt it so very strongly last year, and I made up my mind that I would never do it again. If one wishes to hold up one's head in society at all, one must entertain. It need not be upon a

large scale, and it need not cost much ; but there is just the feeling, you know, that one can have a few people to dinner sometimes, and that one has a decent house to receive one's visitors in. I have thought very often lately that I have acted rather unfairly to Edith in remaining unsettled, year after year, as I have done. It is so difficult to see one's duty plainly ! I believe now that what I ought to have done would have been to establish myself in a small house at the far end of Belgrave Road, or some other cheap place. It would have been very nasty ; but it would have given her an opportunity of sometimes catching glimpses of civilisation. There is no help for it now, though. To hire a house in London for the season would be out of the question ; and to lodgings I will not go. As I said to Lady Laura Smythe the other day, going into society in that sort of way is almost like living upon the charity of others—a thing I could never consent to do.'

If Margaret did not answer immediately, it was because she was half afraid that it was not in her power to make the only answer that could be considered at all to the point. That a childless woman, with fifteen thousand a year and the simplest of personal tastes, should ever be in want of money may sound somewhat incredible ; but it is said by those who ought to know that

there are people with twice Mrs. Stanniforth's means who are not unacquainted with the pinch of poverty. However that may be, it is certain that Margaret was not, in the true sense of the word, rich. From various causes, which need not be entered into now, she was seldom able to keep a large balance at her bankers', and it has been shown before what excellent reasons she had for desiring to lay by a certain sum every year. Still, she felt that, if she remained long silent, her mother's delicate scruples would be aroused, and poor Edith would get no London season. Therefore she only hesitated a moment before declaring cheerfully that the London house ought to be her affair, and that she would give instructions about securing one forthwith.

Mrs. Winnington could not hear of such a thing. No! she knew too well how many people had claims—if you could call them claims—upon poor dear Margaret, and what it cost to provide young men with unlimited travelling-expenses and the best singing-masters in Italy. No! if dear Margaret had wished to take a house in London for *herself*, that would have been another thing; but Mrs. Winnington could not accept, and would not accept, even from her own daughter—and so forth, and so forth, for ten minutes, without a break. In the course of these ten minutes it did, indeed.

transpire that there was a small house in Park Street, belonging to a particular friend of Lady Laura Smythe's, which was now to be had ; but the rent asked for it was quite too ridiculous—which was a pity, as the situation and the very modest dimensions of the house might have made it suitable in other ways. 'But,' added Mrs. Winnington, 'no doubt it will be snapped up at once. Lady Laura asked me to let her have a reply by return of post. So absurd of her! As if I could possibly afford such an expense! But I never can get people to understand that your purse is not mine.'

The remainder of the argument need scarcely be chronicled. Of course Margaret protested that all that was hers was her mother's, and of course Mrs. Winnington pointed out that, however justifiable such a theory might be upon abstract grounds, it was impossible to make it fit in with the conditions of a sophisticated state of society. The generous dispute was a prolonged one ; but it was not so unduly prolonged as to prevent Mrs. Winnington from dashing off a few hasty lines to Lady Laura Smythe in time to catch the midday post.

Margaret breathed more freely as soon as this question was disposed of. In the impending catastrophe her mother's sympathies would not, as she well knew, be with her ; and it would be

best for her to be alone when the terrible disclosure had to be made. It should not be made before an answer should have come from Philip : she had now so far recovered her scattered wits as to have decided upon that much. She would write to him, enclosing Hugh's letter, and she would not condemn him until he should have had an opportunity of giving his version of the story. Who knew but that he might be able to exculpate himself? Even a prisoner who has been caught in the act of entering a dwelling-house by the area-window at midnight is held innocent until he has been proved guilty ; and was she not to extend the same measure of bare justice to poor Philip ? She had already begun to think of him as ' poor Philip,' it will be observed. Perhaps in his case, as in that of the supposititious burglar, it was upon the absence of ' felonious intent ' that she built her vain hopes.

But, as the day went on, it became more and more apparent to her that she could never live through the long interval of suspense that must take place before a reply could be received from Florence. This, she calculated, could not, at earliest, be before the fifth day ; and to exist in a state of torment through four mortal days and nights was an ordeal not to be faced, if by any means it could be avoided. She longed to

telegraph, but could not see her way to doing so, consistently with prudence ; for Longbourne was not one of the houses where telegrams are received and despatched so frequently as to give rise to no remark ; and, besides that, it would be impossible to frame a message which should be at once intelligible to Philip and unintelligible to the clerks at the Crayminster post-office. It was while pondering the latter difficulty that Margaret thought of a very simple expedient for overcoming it. Why should she not word her telegram in a foreign language ? The notion pleased her so much, and her desire to be put speedily out of her pain was so strong, that she resolved, at last, to run the risk ; and in the course of the afternoon she set out to walk across the fields to Crayminster, and to write the momentous question with her own hand. She did not care to let the servants know that she was in such haste to communicate with Mr. Marescalchi, and she would not drive, for she knew that if she did so her mother would accompany her.

The young gentleman who snatched Mrs. Stanniforth's telegraph-form out of her hand—(is it because postmen always have the gratuities of Christmas before their mind's eye, while post-office clerks have nothing connected with that season to look forward to, except an increase of

labour, that the former are so subservient and the latter so outrageously offensive in their demeanour towards the public?)—this young gentleman was as satisfactorily puzzled as could have been wished. Margaret had written distinctly the following words in German, having had doubts as to the trustworthiness of French in this age of universal accomplishment : ‘Is it the case that you are not free to marry? Pray telegraph the exact truth. Hugh has been in Conduit Street.’ This message, after much preliminary frowning and muttering, was accepted and paid for; and when Margaret had asked three times at what hour it would be delivered, and had been answered at last by a curt, ‘Can’t say, ’m shaw,’ she started on her homeward way.

It was a long up-hill walk, and the sun was hot and scorching, as it often is in the month of May. Margaret, weary in body and mind, had lost all thinking power, and, fortunately for herself, was unable to suffer in anticipation of a terrible future. Her one anxiety, then and throughout the remainder of the day, was that the reply to her telegram should reach her after her mother and sister had gone to bed. It would have puzzled her to give any account afterwards of the manner in which she had got through that interminable afternoon and even-

ing. But somehow or other the time passed ; and Fortune was very kind to her ; for hardly had Mrs. Winnington and Edith wished her good-night, and gone upstairs, than a ring at the front door brought her heart into her mouth ; and a minute later the wished-for yellow envelope was in her hands.

She tore it open, devoured its contents, and then, covering her face with her hands, burst into tears of joy. Philip's answer was brief and to the point ; and he had not thought it necessary to employ any language but his own. ' All right. Free as air. Very natural mistake of Kenyon's. Will write about this and the other matter shortly.'

It was very well to be thankful ; but it was unfortunate, though not perhaps very surprising, that Margaret's thankfulness should have been mingled with a strong feeling of wrath against the luckless Hugh Kenyon. ' How like Hugh to jump to conclusions in that way ! ' she thought. ' Hugh would believe anything bad of Philip ; and he never considers what misery he inflicts upon me when he makes such cruel accusations.'

This was, no doubt, extremely unjust, since Colonel Kenyon was about the last man in England to jump to conclusions, and certainly the last to inflict needless pain upon those whom he loved ; but that he was ready to believe any-

thing bad of Philip was true enough, and it was probably this predisposition which Margaret found it most hard to forgive. She sat down forthwith, and scribbled off a hasty letter, which would have gone near to breaking Hugh's heart if he had ever received it. But he never did receive it ; for his correspondent, after relieving her feelings by saying some very cutting things, wisely tore up what she had written, and went to bed at peace with all mankind, forgiving her friends as well as her enemies.

It was not until the following morning that she began to wonder what might be that 'other matter' to which Philip had made allusion ; but it did not occur to her to attach any importance to the phrase. He might have intended to refer to his engagement to Nellie, or to his plans for remaining at Florence—most likely to the former. Thursday, therefore, was a day of rest and freedom from care for Margaret ; but upon the Friday morning she found, beside her plate at breakfast-time, the letter which had been written at Signora Tommasini's instance, and which had been posted before the telegram from Longbourne had reached its destination. The substance of this letter astonished and perturbed Margaret a good deal ; but it by no means filled her with consternation, as Colonel Kenyon's had done. Considering the haste with which it had been

written, it was a not unskilfully worded epistle. It was—so Margaret thought—quite unnecessarily contrite in tone, and it explained to her full satisfaction Philip's previous silence. It was both natural and becoming that, upon the first blush of the thing, he should have held himself bound by his promise to Prosser, and it was a proof of his heart's being in the right place that, after more mature consideration, he should have found it impossible to keep any secret from herself. As to the main point, her sympathies and hopes were entirely upon the side of her adopted son. Most willingly would she retire from Longbourne to let him enter there as master, and most thankful would she be if the respectability of his birth could be proved beyond a doubt. Not having had time to contemplate possible side-issues, she was inclined to hail the news, so far as it went, as thoroughly good news.

'A letter from Florence?' asked Mrs. Winnington, insinuatingly, across the table. 'All well, I hope?'

'Philip has got over his journey safely,' answered Margaret, with pardonable equivocation.

'So glad! Now, dearest Margaret, don't you think you might come up to London to us for a time? We would not keep you a day longer than you wished to stay; but I really

believe you would enjoy yourself, when once you were there.'

What reply Mrs. Stanniforth would have made to this kindly pressure to partake of her own hospitality will never be known ; for at this moment Edith, who had been looking out of the window, turned round to say that one of the cows had got into the garden, and was eating up the roses.

'*Oh!*' exclaimed Margaret, and flew out on to the terrace, followed by her sister.

An exciting chase, subsequently joined in by two gardeners, ensued, and lasted for a matter of ten minutes, while Mrs. Winnington looked on from the window with a face of strong disapproval. It did not accord with her views of propriety that ladies should rush about and make themselves hot, when they had a large staff of retainers handsomely paid to do that for them. Such behaviour, she thought, lowered one in the eyes of one's inferiors, and encouraged them to take liberties. Possibly with a desire to spare herself the sight of so degrading a spectacle, she turned away, and began carelessly glancing at the letters which Margaret had imprudently left on the table. It has been said before that Mrs. Winnington's notions with regard to the sacredness of other people's letters were of a liberal order ; and she did not for a moment hesitate to

draw these from their envelopes. And so it came to pass that when Margaret returned—flushed and breathless, but triumphant—she found her mother extended rigidly upon her chair, with the soles of her feet well exposed to view, her head falling on to her shoulder, and her arms hanging helpless by her sides like those of a rag doll. What had happened was only too evident ; and Margaret, for once, lost all control over her indignation.

‘ Really, mother,’ she exclaimed, ‘ this is too bad ! Why do you read my letters ? ’

‘ Oh, Margaret,’ answered Mrs. Winnington, in a hollow voice, ‘ do not—*do* not speak of such trifles at a moment like this ! How you can scamper after cows, when you may be upon the brink of being turned out of your house, is more than I can comprehend. This is what one gets by adopting orphans and pampering them ! But for your infatuation, this wretched boy might have died years ago.’

‘ Nonsense, mother ! it is not in the least certain that I shall be turned out of my house ; and I don’t care if I am. You ought not to have looked at my letter, and you have no business to know anything about this. The least that you can do now is to behave as if you knew nothing about it.’

‘ Very well, my dear ; if you think that is a

proper way to speak to your mother, I can say no more. In my opinion, letters that are left open upon the table are as much public property as newspapers ; and I must say I should never have supposed you wished to conceal anything from me. Pray do not imagine that I shall interfere in the matter, directly or indirectly. It must be sifted, however,' continued Mrs. Winnington, assuming a more erect attitude. 'The woman Prosser must be sent for at once, and made to tell all that she knows.'

'I cannot allow it !' exclaimed Margaret. 'The secret is Philip's, not mine, and it would be most ungenerous in me to betray him. It would not do any good either ; for, naturally, Prosser could tell us no more than she told him.'

'It would do this good,' answered Mrs. Winnington, 'that it would set my mind at rest. I don't believe a word of this story, mind you—not a word of it ! It might be easy enough for that woman to deceive a silly, vain boy ; but she will not find it so easy to deceive me, I can tell her.'

The issue was inevitable. Mrs. Winnington had taken the bit between her teeth, and Margaret knew full well that argument would be thrown away upon her. Indeed, the good lady herself confessed as much. She was not going to interfere in any way, she said ; but at the

same time she could not blind herself to her plain duty. She could not sit still and allow a monstrous fraud to be concocted under her daughter's roof; and, in short, if the mountain would not come to Mahomet, Mahomet must go to the mountain. In other words, Mrs. Winnington expressed her intention, in the last resort, of betaking herself to the housekeeper's room, and doing battle there.

As a choice of evils, therefore, Mrs. Prosser was summoned, and probably derived much satisfaction from the spectacle of her enemy's discomfiture. Mrs. Prosser, it need hardly be said, was victorious all along the line. Her evidence was not to be shaken by the most searching cross-examination; nor did she allow herself to be moved for one instant from the placid respectfulness of her bearing. Mrs. Winnington she ignored altogether, addressing her replies exclusively to Margaret, and, it must be confessed, producing a rather favourable impression upon the latter by her straightforwardness. When pressed to say why she had not told her story before, she answered that that was a matter 'betwixt her and her conscience,' and she must 'decline for to enter upon it again.' She had 'already spoke to Mr. Philip upon the subjeck.'

'It all seems to be the most preposterous rubbish!' cried Mrs. Winnington, at length.

‘At all events, the question cannot be set at rest without a lawsuit ; that is certain.’

‘I don’t think, ma’am,’ observed Mrs. Prosser to Margaret, ‘as Mr. Neville would wish to go to law, if Mr. Philip’s rights was proved to his satisfaction ; and I believe there is nobody else who could do so.’

‘Of course there could be nobody else, Prosser,’ answered Margaret. ‘It is a pity, I think, that you did not speak sooner ; but I quite believe all that you have told us. It does not prove anything——’

‘Nothing at all, ma’am.’

‘Still, it may help us to find out the truth. You can go now, Prosser. For the present, I hope you will say no more about this to any one.’

‘If you remember, ma’am, my own wishes was that you should not be told yourself, as long as ’twas uncertain,’ replied Mrs. Prosser, scoring this final hit as she dropped a curtsey in the doorway. ‘If ’tis known far and wide before the week is out, ’twill not be through me, ma’am, you may depend.’

CHAPTER XXV.

CONSULTATIONS.

Mrs. PROSSER exceeded the limits of justifiable innuendo when she hinted that the disclosure which she had made would be known far and wide in the course of a week. Mrs. Winnington was not the woman to publish abroad anything that might hereafter tell to her own or her daughter's disadvantage ; nor did she at all allude to the subject when paying a round of calls upon neighbours whom she could not refuse herself the pleasure of informing that she had taken a house in Park Street for the season. But, on the other hand, she talked of nothing else in the family circle. She soon made her peace with Margaret, remembering that something was due to one who had behaved with so much liberality in the matter of that Park Street house ; and although she could not acknowledge that she had been guilty of any impropriety in reading Philip's letter, she went so far as to say that she was sorry for having done so, since Margaret's

feelings had been hurt thereby. Margaret willingly accepted this apology, such as it was, apologised on her side for the hasty expressions which she had used in the heat of the moment, and only begged that the whole question might be suffered to remain in abeyance until further particulars should be forthcoming.

Mrs. Winnington said no doubt that would be best ; that was exactly what she herself would advise ; for what could be the good of discussing a story which would in all probability turn out to be false from beginning to end ? After which, she went on to discuss it in all its bearings. In all such of its bearings, that is, as seemed likely to affect her own family ; for it was with these alone that she troubled herself. Old Mr. Stanniforth would be none the worse off, whatever might happen ; but Margaret was in danger of being deprived of her home without a halfpenny of compensation ; and the truly grievous part of the business was that she would have in a manner created her own despoiler, since it was tolerably certain that Philip would never have been heard of in England but for her ill-judged charity. The good lady's thoughts were thus so engrossed that she quite overlooked the circumstance that the chief sufferer would be Mr. Brune, who would assuredly be called upon to refund the purchase-money of an estate which

had never been his to dispose of. When, however, Margaret drew her attention to this aspect of the affair, she admitted that the poor man's case was a hard one.

‘And that,’ said she, ‘makes me the more anxious that you should consult him without loss of time. In fact, I think it would be hardly honest to keep him any longer in ignorance of his danger.’

Margaret said that was not her feeling at all. She would much rather say nothing to Mr. Brune yet.

‘Well, my dear, if you feel any hesitation about speaking to him, I should not mind doing it myself. I do not like Mr. Brune ; his manners are very uncouth and abrupt, and I have no doubt he will be rude to me. Still, we must not consider that. If you can spare me the carriage this afternoon, I will just drive over to Broom Leas, and have a few words with him.’

Margaret groaned. ‘I thought you agreed with me,’ she said, ‘that the best thing we could do was to hold our tongues ?’

‘Unquestionably the best thing—it is the *only* thing that we can do. But that is not to say that we should neglect any means of gaining information. Mr. Brune must have known more about his brother than we can do, and it is quite

possible that he may have been aware of the existence of this Italian lady, and may be able to tell us who she was. At least it can do no harm to ask him.'

'I think it may do a great deal of harm,' Margaret protested.

But she could neither gag her mother nor lock the door upon her; and so, in the course of the afternoon, Mr. Brune, who was enjoying himself in his shirt-sleeves, lopping off the straggling branches of a laurel hedge on his domain with a billhook, was startled by the apparition of a lady whose visits were never very welcome to him.

Mrs. Winnington's customary bland smile of greeting was tempered by a mournfulness which it was impossible to ignore. 'So sorry to disturb you,' said she; 'but I was told that I should find you here, and as I wanted to speak to you rather particularly——' Here a natural feeling of curiosity caused her to break off, and inquire, 'Do you really *like* doing that?'

'I really do,' answered Mr. Brune, resuming his coat with some reluctance. 'The only objection to hedging and ditching is that, when one is employed in that way, one is scarcely in trim to receive visitors. But I dare say you will kindly excuse me from shaking hands with

you, Mrs. Winnington. You were saying that you wanted particularly to speak to me.'

'Yes, indeed!' replied Mrs. Winnington, with a great sigh.

'Has Philip Marescalchi broken his neck? If he has, don't mind saying so; I can bear to hear the worst.'

Mrs. Winnington sighed again. 'Oh, no,' said she regretfully; 'he has not broken his neck. But it is about him that I am anxious to consult you.'

And then the tale was told, and was listened to without a word or a sign of interruption. Mrs. Winnington was a good deal put out by the calm way in which every one, except herself, seemed to take the disquieting prospect that was opening out before them.

'Well, Mr. Brune?' she said impatiently, when she had waited for some seconds in vain for her companion to speak.

'Well, Mrs. Winnington?'

'What do you think of all this? Do you believe that there is any truth in it? Do you think your brother was a likely man to make a clandestine marriage?'

'My dear madam, is it possible for me to answer such questions to any purpose? Yes; all things considered, I should say it was probably true. I see no reason why Prosser should have

invented the words which she says she heard ; and the dates appear to be correct, and there is a suggestive similarity between the names of Brown and Brune. Oh, yes ; the chances are all in favour of its being true. As to whether my brother George was a likely man to act as he is said to have done, I really can't give an opinion upon the subject. In one sense nobody is likely to do such a thing, and, in another sense, anybody is. One is never surprised at hearing that a man has been married on the sly ; but I take it that no one has natural proclivities that way.'

'But, dear me !' exclaimed Mrs. Winnington, 'aren't you going to do anything ? Do you mean to sit still and allow yourself to be plundered ? Can't you make any inquiries ?'

'I shall write to my brother's lawyers, and ask them whether they know anything. It appears that Marescalchi's mother was accustomed to receive remittances from her husband's lawyers.'

'H'm—yes ; it would be well to do that, certainly. I feel that we ought to be bestirring ourselves. It would be a terrible blow to poor Margaret to be driven from her home.'

'I shall be only too happy to talk things over with Mrs. Stanniforth, if that would be any comfort to her.'

‘ Well, the truth is that dear Margaret rather shrinks from speaking about the matter at all. But if you can suggest any way in which *I* could be of service——’

‘ You are most kind. No ; I don’t know that you can do anything,’ replied Mr. Brune, thinking of Diogenes and Alexander, but patiently refraining from applying the precedent to the present case.

A pause of some minutes supervened, during which Mrs. Winnington fidgeted irritably, and Mr. Brune looked wistfully at his billhook. It was evident that the man did not choose to be communicative ; and it only remained for his visitor to leave him, consoling herself as best she might with the hope that something—or rather that nothing—might come of the lawyers’ letter.

This hope was fulfilled some days later, when Messrs. Hobson & Jobson wrote to say that, to the best of their belief, their late client had lived and died a bachelor. They had, at all events, never transacted business on his behalf with any Italian lady. So far so good ; but Mrs. Winnington, as may possibly be remembered, had a personal acquaintance with the senior member of the firm, and she could not resist writing to him in a friendly, informal manner, to beg for his candid opinion upon this

most distressing subject. His answer made her rather uncomfortable.

‘DEAR MADAM (wrote Mr. Hobson),

‘We have already been in communication with Mr. Brune with reference to the matter upon which you consult me, and I have nothing to add to the reply sent to him. Speaking generally, however, I may say that, supposing such a marriage as you mention to have taken place, it would in my opinion be in the last degree improbable that Mr. George Brune, or any other man similarly situated, would have let his family lawyers into his secret.

‘Faithfully yours,

‘SAML. HOBSON.’

‘And this is the man who has dined with us over and over again, and has stayed in the house upon three separate occasions!’ cried Mrs. Winnington, very angry with Mr. Hobson for having written so curtly, and still more angry with him for having suggested such unpleasant doubts. ‘I will never trouble myself to be civil to a solicitor again as long as I live.’

In the meantime Margaret had heard once more from Philip, who filled three pages with a description of Florence, mentioned incidentally that he expected soon to have an interview with

his uncle, Signor Cavestri, who was coming from Bologna to meet him, and said not one word about the subject of Margaret's telegram until quite the end of his sheet. 'I meant to have told you all about that Conduit Street business,' he wrote; 'but, after all, I think it will keep until we meet. There are some things which it is just as well not to commit to paper, and one is not at liberty to tell everything even to one's best friends. But, my dear old Meg, how *could* you suppose that, if I had had one wife living, I should think of marrying another? I am not a bit angry, you know; but I am rather amused, I confess, and surprised that you should not know me better. Colonel Kenyon, no doubt, thinks me capable of all manner of iniquity. Even he might have given me credit for some small amount of prudence, though.' And then he added in a postscript: 'If you have spoken to Nellie of what you have heard, and if she feels at all uneasy or dissatisfied, of course I will write to her more fully. Otherwise I think least said soonest mended for the present.'

It was not because this explanation struck her as insufficient that Margaret wrote a line to Hugh Kenyon, requesting him to run down for a day or two and see her. She held—and she was doubtless right in holding—that it was worse than useless to bestow confidence by

halves, and that, if she believed Philip at all, she must believe, without requiring further elucidation, that he was entirely innocent of the offence imputed to him. But with Mrs. Winton buzzing about her, like a great blue-bottle, at all hours of the day, with Mr. Brune and Nellie holding aloof as if they were offended, and with her own uncertainty as to what course events would take, and what development she ought to hope for, she did feel a strong wish for a little sympathy; and, that being so, it was natural that she should turn her eyes towards that quarter whence sympathy had been forthcoming for so many years.

Hugh, it is needless to say, obeyed the summons with alacrity. Despite the melancholy character of the occasion, he arrived in Longbourne in better spirits than he had enjoyed for many months past. Margaret's note had led him to hope that he was to be reinstated in that post of confidential adviser which he had forfeited by his untimely declaration, and which, notwithstanding many friendly assurances to the contrary, he was well aware had never been fully restored to him. She was coming back to him, he thought; she had turned to him instinctively in the time of her trouble; and, although he did not now expect that she would ever consent to be anything more than his

friend, it would be a great deal to be received again upon the old terms. Without exactly rejoicing over Philip's downfall, he yet could not help feeling that if that young deceiver were cut off with a shilling—the traditional shilling being represented by a few hundreds a year)—his most dangerous rival would be removed.

He was therefore not a little taken aback by the first words that Margaret addressed to him.

‘Hugh, what made you give me such a dreadful fright? You were quite mistaken about my poor boy.’

‘Mistaken! how mistaken?’

‘There was no truth whatever in that—report about his being married.’

‘You mean that he denies it, I suppose.’

‘Yes. I telegraphed to him at once, and had an answer the same night, and since then I have heard from him. He says it was a natural mistake on your part, but it can all be easily explained.’

‘God bless my soul! what explanation does he give?’

Margaret was obliged to confess that nothing very explicit had reached her from Philip beyond a bare denial; but that, she said, was quite enough for her. His word was sufficient, and she could perfectly enter into his reasons for

disliking to put upon paper what might very well be communicated by word of mouth. Letters, unfortunately, were sometimes read by people to whom they were not addressed, and very likely Philip had thought of that. 'It was wrong of me to distrust him at all,' she concluded. 'For you, of course, it was different; but, as he says, I ought to have known him better.'

'Oh! is that all he says?'

'You can see his letter, if you like,' answered Margaret, handing over the sheet in question. 'I don't know whether you will find it convincing, but it is quite so to me.'

Hugh read the short paragraph which has been quoted above, and drew down the corners of his mouth. 'It strikes me as a shuffling sort of statement,' he remarked. 'It's all very well to say, "How can you believe that I should be such a blackguard as to do so and so?" but that's no answer to a man who saw you do it.'

'It is an answer to me, at any rate. And don't you think, Hugh, that you were rather in a hurry to take things for granted? You never made any inquiries, you know.'

'But, my dear Margaret, I had the evidence of my own senses. I saw the woman enter the house with him. I called in Conduit Street afterwards, and found that they were living there as husband and wife. I heard the land-

lady speak of her as Mrs. Marescalchi. What more would you have?’

‘Oh, I admit that it is mysterious,’ said Margaret; ‘but what of that? So many things are mysterious until they are explained. Might it not have been to serve a friend in some way that he allowed that woman to pass as his wife for a time? I think that is conceivable.’

‘I don’t,’ said Hugh, shortly.

‘And you don’t believe him on his word?’

Hugh looked up uneasily. ‘There is no one on earth whom I trust more implicitly than I do you,’ he said; ‘but if you were to tell me that your name was not Margaret Stanniforth, and that you didn’t think it necessary to say any more at present, but would explain it all some day or other, how could I bring myself to believe that you were speaking the truth?’

‘Ah, well,’ said Margaret, ‘women have more faith than men, I suppose. I should believe you if you told me black was white. But never mind. I am as certain as I am of my own existence that Philip will be able to clear himself all in good time; and we won’t say any more about it now, especially as I have something else to tell you, which I have been thinking of a great deal more during the last few days.’

Colonel Kenyon’s astonishment was only

equalled by his disgust when he was informed of the fresh complication of which Philip Mare-scalchi was the central figure. 'Confound that fellow!' he exclaimed; 'I wish to heaven his mother had scragged him when he was a baby! He seems bound to bring perpetual trouble in one way or another. And the provoking part of it is that you don't mind it a bit. I believe you rather enjoy it.'

This little outburst of impatience had the happy effect of making Margaret laugh. Upon which Hugh laughed too; and thus friendly relations, which for a moment had shown symptoms of becoming strained, were re-established.

'Now tell me,' said Margaret; 'do you think Philip is really Mr. George Brune's son?'

Hugh was compelled to acknowledge that the story had a horrid air of probability about it. 'To tell you the truth,' he added, 'I noticed his likeness to the family long ago; but I set it down to mere coincidence.'

'Yes; is it not strange that I should never have remarked it? I see it so plainly now; and not only that, but I can trace a decided resemblance between his character and Mr. Brune's.'

'There I can't go along with you.'

'That is because you like Mr. Brune, and

you have never liked my poor Philip. But perhaps it is not so much a similarity in actual character that I mean, as in ways of speaking and looking at things. I know exactly what Mr. Brune will say in certain cases, and it is just what Philip says, and often in the very same words. Both of them have a way of pretending to laugh at everything, and both of them are really as tender-hearted as women. I wish you knew Philip as well as I do. You can't think what a penitent letter he wrote me about this journey of his to Florence, and how grieved he is at the idea of my having to give up Longbourne. As if it was any fault of his that he is his father's son !'

'Well, I am glad to hear that he is penitent,' said Hugh, getting up, and walking about the room. 'As for your leaving Longbourne, I don't know about that, I'm sure. It will be a case for the lawyers, I fear.'

'Why should it be? If once it can be proved that Count Marescalchi and Mr. George Brune were one and the same person, there can be no more to be said. I am sure Mr. Brune would not go to law with Philip.'

'Perhaps not; but it's rather an intricate question. You see, old Mr. Stanniforth made a gift of the estate to Jack, and the title-deeds are now in the hands of the trustees. I know

no more of law than I do of Hebrew; but I suppose we could not surrender them at all events until the purchase-money had been refunded.'

'But then there is the compensation paid by the railway company.'

'Yes; but I don't know whether old Stanniforth would disgorge that without making a fight for it. He is a sharp old fellow—or used to be. It is a most unmitigated nuisance, look at it which way you will.'

'It will all come right in the end,' said Margaret, confidently.

'I am not at all so sure of that. I would much rather it went wrong in the beginning, I know. I wonder, now, whether there is any hope of that old Prosser's having trumped up a plausible story to serve some ends of her own. It is difficult to believe that a woman could keep a secret like that entirely to herself for a dozen years and more.'

'She had the safety-valve of confession to her parish priest, you see.'

'What, to old Langley? Do you mean to say he has known this all along, and never said a word?'

'I suppose he has. He has not been here since the disclosure, and I suspect he is rather afraid of facing us.'

‘Well he may be, the old Jesuit! I shall look him up this afternoon, and hear what he has to say for himself.’

‘You won’t be rude to him, will you, Hugh? You must remember that he has only done what he would consider to be his bounden duty in keeping Prosser’s secret.’

‘Oh, I won’t be rude to him,’ answered Hugh: ‘I only want to find out how much he knows. I suppose he’ll tell me the truth anyhow.’

The result of this determination was that Colonel Kenyon formed one of a congregation of three at evensong, and, waiting for the rector afterwards, put the reverend gentleman, as he mentally expressed it, ‘through his facings.’

‘Yes, yes,’ Mr. Langley said; ‘an unfortunate affair in many ways; but let us hope that some arrangement may be come to. I am glad the woman has at length made up her mind to tell what she knew. I have been urging her to do so for years past.’

‘But why didn’t you make her speak out? Couldn’t you have withheld absolution, or something?’

Mr. Langley smiled. ‘I think you hardly understand the case,’ he said. ‘There could be no question of absolution, the woman having committed no sin. What she revealed to me

was in the nature of a strictly confidential communication, made to me as her priest.'

'She said it was under seal of confession.'

'Ah, yes; a slight confusion of terms not uncommon among the uneducated. It is true that she first divulged the matter to me as a part of her confession; but I pointed out to her at the time that she was wrong in doing so. Of course I could not do otherwise than regard what was imparted to me in such a manner as sacred. Since then I have lost no opportunity of impressing upon her what I believed to be her duty; but she is, unfortunately, a very obstinate person. I should not have felt myself justified in laying a positive command upon her so long as she held it a matter of conscience to keep silence.'

'Well, I don't know,' said Hugh, twirling his moustache; 'I should have thought you might have brought a little more pressure to bear; but it's not much use talking about that now. You believe, then, that old Brune really said all that?'

'I have not a doubt of it; and I may add that I have very little doubt as to young Marscalchi's being the son.'

'It's a horrid bore,' remarked Hugh. 'I expect I shall have a lot of bother over it; and I'm afraid our friends at Broom Leas will suffer.'

And he went on to explain some of the difficulties which he anticipated, and which were likely to interfere with the amicable family arrangement to which Mr. Langley, as well as Mrs. Prosser, appeared to have looked forward.

Mr. Langley could only express his sympathy and regret, adding, as a moral to be deduced from the whole affair, that if the late Mr. Brune had been a sound Churchman, all this trouble would have been avoided. 'In such a case, he would have sent to me upon his death-bed—which I am sorry to say that he did not think fit to do—and the truth would have been revealed.'

'What, even if he had made it the subject of a strictly confidential communication?' Hugh could not help saying.

'Unquestionably. Concealment of marriage, and the leaving of a child destitute, would be deadly sin; whereas it might very well be a question with many people how far they were entitled to make public words spoken by one in a state of delirium. But perhaps I had better not weary you with definitions,' said Mr. Langley, rather coldly. 'I trust,' he added, 'that there is no feeling of soreness as regards me in my dear friend Mrs. Stanniforth's mind.'

'Oh, she'll forgive you,' said Hugh; 'she'd forgive anybody for doing anything.' And as

he walked away, it occurred to him that there was only one person in the world towards whom he had ever known Margaret to display an unforgiving spirit, and that that person was himself. Which seemed a little hard.

Trudging pensively homewards along the deep lanes, he heard himself, on a sudden, called by name, and was presently overtaken by Nellie Brune—a person whom, under the circumstances, he would much rather not have encountered.

‘Have you come down about this business, Colonel Kenyon?’ she asked. ‘Is it really true that Philip is Uncle George’s son?’

‘Ah, that’s just what I want to know, Miss Brune,’ answered Hugh. ‘If I were not afraid of making you angry, I should say I hope he isn’t.’

‘Oh, but I hope the same thing,’ said Nellie, quickly.

‘Why, I thought the great wish of your life was that Longbourne should come back into the possession of your family.’

‘But I don’t want Mrs. Stanniforth to be turned adrift. And, besides, I could never feel as if Philip were one of us.’

‘You ought not to have much difficulty in feeling that,’ said Hugh, looking at her kindly. His honest heart was so full of pity for the poor girl that he hardly knew how to speak to her

without betraying himself. He could not doubt that Philip was a married man, and he had already formed an indefinite resolution that he would prove him to be so, and thus at least save Miss Brune from the danger of an irreparable calamity. But what in the world was he to say to the girl now?’

She allowed his allusion to pass, and asked : ‘Do you suppose that Philip knew of this before he went to Florence?’

‘Of course he did; it was the old house-keeper who told him, you know. In fact, I imagine that he only went to Florence in order to get at documentary proof of Mr. Brune’s marriage.’

Nellie tightened her lips, and nodded. ‘I suspected as much,’ said she.

‘Ah, you’re beginning to find the young rascal out,’ thought Hugh, with some satisfaction. But, feeling that the devil ought to have his due, he said aloud: ‘I am not sure that you can exactly blame him, you know, for not saying anything about it before he started. It seems that he did write without loss of time.’

‘He need not have said what was untrue, though. He told us all that he was going there to study.’

‘Well, perhaps he is going to study.’

‘Yes ; I dare say he is,’ agreed Nellie, hastily, thinking perhaps that she had said too much. ‘Will you give my best love to Mrs. Stanniforth, please?’

‘Certainly I will,’ answered Hugh ; ‘but why don’t you come up and see her? She thinks you are offended with her about this unlucky business.’

‘Oh, no!’ exclaimed Nellie ; ‘what possible reason could I have for being offended with her? I have kept away lately because—because—— It is rather difficult to explain ; only don’t you know how disagreeable it is to talk over things with people when you don’t quite agree with them, and when they—think you ought to agree with them?’

And, having given utterance to this somewhat vague sentiment, Miss Brune took her leave rather hurriedly.

‘I wonder whether she really cares for that worthless fellow,’ mused Hugh, resuming his walk. ‘I don’t believe she does ; and I’m sure I hope she doesn’t. It was Margaret who got up the match, I suspect. What a pity it is that she will insist upon making people happy in her own way, whether they wish it or not!’

And, as soon as he reached the house, he delivered Nellie’s message, adding carelessly on his own account : ‘She doesn’t seem to pine for

her absent lover to any alarming extent. Is she very much in love with him, do you think?’

‘More so than you might suppose,’ answered Margaret, smiling. ‘Nellie shows her feelings very little ; but I understand her, and I know that she has never cared a pin’s head for any one but Philip. It is a very long-standing attachment on both sides ; but want of money has prevented matters from coming to a climax. I am so very glad that the engagement took place while Philip was still a poor man ; I think they will both be glad to remember that afterwards.’

‘But even if he gets Longbourne, he will be a poor man.’

‘He will be well enough off to marry, I suppose ; and then, I hope I may be able to help them out a little.’

To this Hugh made no answer, except to shake his head gravely ; and as Mrs. Winnington came in at that moment, eager to hear whether anything fresh had been elicited from Mr. Langley, the subject dropped.

He had no further opportunity for private conversation with Margaret that day. The whole evening was occupied by an amicable contest between her and her mother with reference to the latter lady’s move to London ; Mrs. Winnington protesting that she could not bear to leave her daughter in the midst of so much

trouble, while Margaret declared that she was in no trouble at all, and that it would distress her beyond everything to deprive Edith of her season. Hugh, knowing what the outcome of the discussion was certain to be, took little interest in its progress, but sat silently twirling his thumbs and heartily wishing that Mrs. Winnington were in London already. Every now and again he was appealed to—‘Candidly now, Hugh, do you think dear Margaret ought to be left quite alone?’ and so forth. He answered somewhat at random; which was of the less consequence since his answers were never listened to. Edith remained as silent as he throughout, and was to all appearance quite as indifferent. Once, when, just by way of saying something, he asked her whether she was not looking forward to having a great deal of dancing, she replied that she never danced in London, and volunteered the additional information that she hated London at all times, and particularly during the season. Whereupon Mrs. Winnington glanced sharply over her shoulder, exclaiming, ‘Edith, my dear child, how can you talk such nonsense!’ and Edith at once collapsed.

It was close upon midnight before Mrs. Winnington acknowledged herself vanquished, and laid down her arms. ‘If you put it in that

way, my dear,' Hugh heard her saying, 'I suppose I ought not to refuse; but I shall be longing to be with you all the time; and I do trust that you will write or telegraph for me at any moment, if you want me. Unless you promise me that, I positively will not go. You see,' she continued, turning to Hugh with a deprecatory smile, 'how weak I am. I had fully determined to give up all thought of London for the present; but dear Margaret makes such a point of our going that I feel I should have to yield to-morrow, if I did not do so to-day. I am quite ashamed of myself; for I must confess that a few hours ago, I should have said that nothing could shake my resolution.'

As, however, she left at ten o'clock on the following morning, it must be assumed that her maid was endowed with the gift of prophecy, and had packed up in anticipation of the event. Her last words to Hugh, as she stepped into the carriage, were: 'Well, good-bye, dear Hugh. If you should be coming up to London, you must be sure to call on us in Park Street. I hope you understand that I should not be going away now if I thought I could be of any use here. But I really do not believe I could.'

'Not the slightest use in the world,' answered Hugh, whose stock of patience, large as it was,

had not been quite equal to the demand made upon it by the needless waste of his only evening at Longbourne. His duties compelled him to return to Shorncliffe the same afternoon; and it was a little mortifying to him to perceive that Margaret was rather relieved than otherwise when she was told that he, too, must leave her.

He attributed this to his unfortunate inability to sympathise with her upon the subject that was nearest her heart; but it was probably quite as much due to a sensation of embarrassment on her part at finding herself alone in the house with him. It had been comparatively easy to bury the past in oblivion when writing to him, or when other people were at hand; but now that they two were face to face, and free from all chance of interruption, she found it impossible to keep a certain day in the past summer out of her memory; and what was worse, she saw that he was labouring under precisely the same difficulty. Besides which, he had a patient, half-reproachful way of looking at her which made her shy and uncomfortable; and this, in its turn, made her angry. There was something ridiculous, she thought, in a woman of her age being subject to such girlish afflictions; and, after the manner of women, she visited her anger in some degree upon its innocent cause.

Upon the whole, Hugh felt, as he drove away, that his visit had not been a success ; and the same reflection was at the same moment passing through Margaret's mind, while she stood on the doorstep watching the departure of her guest.

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